

ABSTRACT

Shawn Johnson, THE WORD GAP AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON K-5 BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT AND BEYOND, (Under the direction of Dr. Karen Jones). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2024.

Despite numerous efforts to reduce or eliminate the disparities in achievement between black males and their white counterparts in schools, the achievement gap continues to exist. Black males at every level perform at a disproportionately lower rate on state achievement tests and day to day performance in general. This leads to many troubling statistics including higher discipline rates, higher dropout rates, and higher incarceration rates to name a few. When you begin to diagnose these outcomes and consider root causes there are many variables that began to surface as to the reason(s) for this occurrence. For the purpose of this study we will focus on vocabulary acquisition. The implications of a low vocabulary range from low academic performance in school to fewer job opportunities as an adult with many obstacles in between. The 30 Million Word Gap is a study which exposed this reality by studying the interaction and dialogue of families of low economic status to learn the conversation patterns and exposure to words for the children in these homes prior to entry into kindergarten. The findings coined the phrase The 30 Million Word Gap as it was found that children from low economic status homes knew 30 million less words than their more affluent peers by the time they arrived in grade school. The majority of the children in this study were black males. My case study at Lucky Day Elementary School focused on research based instructional strategies to increase vocabulary acquisition and ultimately reduce the word gap. While the study afforded students the opportunity to read books of interest in a structured and intentional manner, the results of the study were inconclusive with regards to impact on word acquisition.

THE WORD GAP AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
ON K-5 BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT AND BEYOND

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by
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DEDICATION

I would loke to dedicate this thesis to those that have the desire but lack the means.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank God for his continued blessings on this journey. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my family, my tribe, and my EdD family for your continued support. I could not have made it without you.

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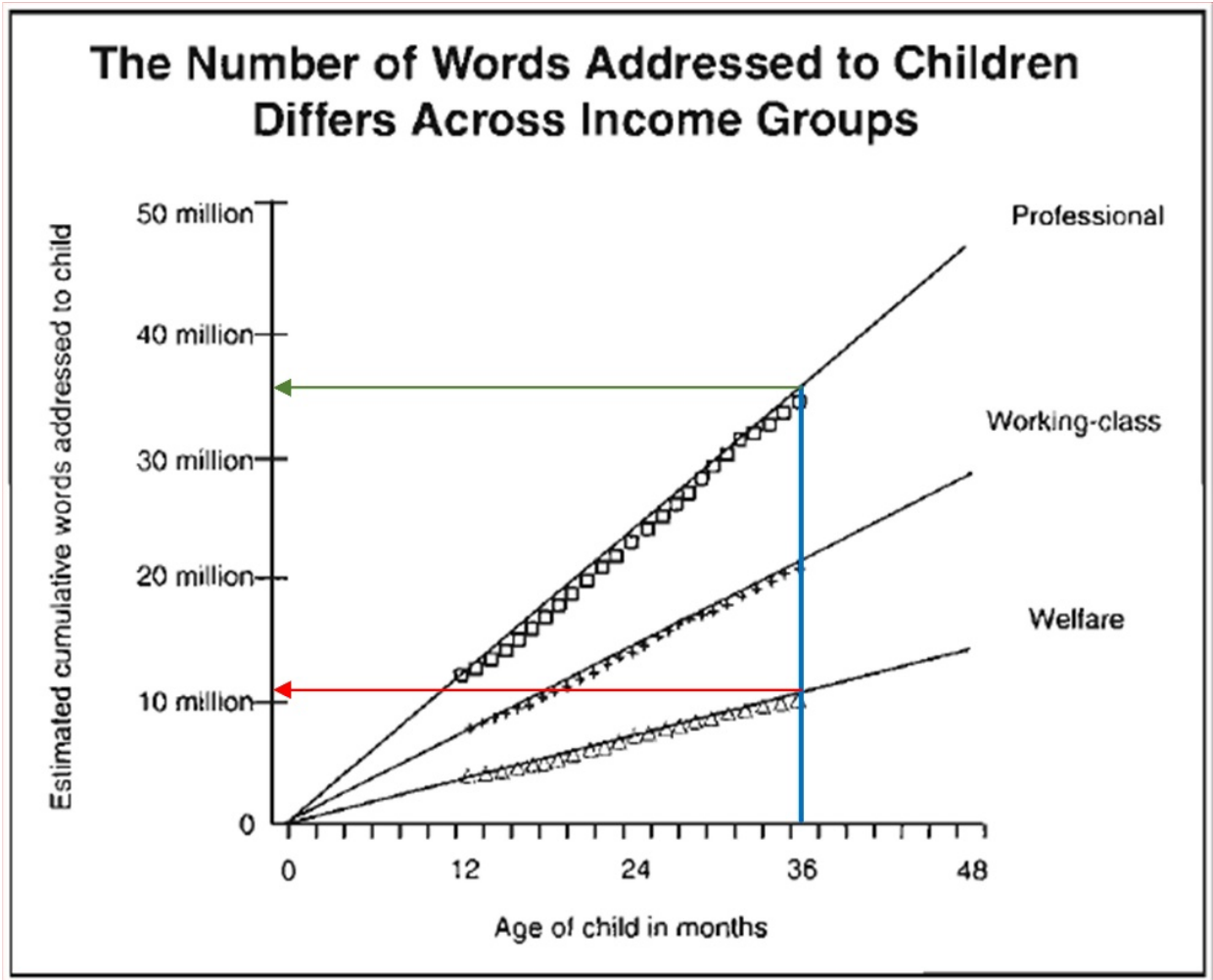
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As an educator, I have spent years earnestly endeavoring to ensure equity in opportunities, instructional practices, and resources for all students—with the goal of enabling success for all. The existence of the word gap—the finding that Hart and Risley (1995) reported that a child from a high-income family will experience 30 million more words within the first 4 years of life than a child from a low-income family. The contribution of such a vocabulary deficit to the achievement gaps that become evident “when one group of students (e.g., students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (i.e., larger than the margin of error)” (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2022) is a matter of great concern that, if left unaddressed, will continue to render similar results. *The Early Catastrophe* (Hart & Risley, 2003; subtitled *The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3*) is an excerpt from Hart and Risley (1995). That earlier study involved their observing 42 families for an hour each month over the course of 2.5 years “to learn about what typically went on in homes with 1- and 2-year-old children learning to talk” (Hart & Risley, 2003, p. 4). Their study revealed disparities between the number of words spoken by parents to their children as well as the types of messages conveyed. At the conclusion of their 1995 study, Hart and Risley concluded that the differences between parent-child interactions correlated with significant discrepancies in children’s knowledge as well as their skills and experiences—with children from high-income families being exposed to 30 million more words than children from families on welfare. They provided Figure 1 to illustrate their findings. The solid vertical line through the final point of their data (just before 36 months) prior to their extrapolation, intersects the line representing the cumulative number of words addressed to children of professionals at approximately 37 million (top green horizontal line) and



Note. Excerpted from Hart and Risley (2003).

Figure 1. Data-supported word gap at 36 months.

the cumulative number of words addressed to children of welfare recipients at approximately 11 million.

Clearly, the difference at 36 months is not 30 million, but apart from the magnitude of the difference, what is striking is the linear growth of the word gap—lending credibility to Hart and Risley’s (2003) extrapolation to 48 months at which point the word gap is well over 30 million. Follow-up studies by Golinkoff et al. (2019) and Logan et al. (2019) showed that these differences in language and interaction experiences correlated with a child’s performance later in life.

My experience as an educational leader at Lucky Day Elementary School (LDES, a pseudonym) leads me to suggest that the difference in entry-level language skills constitutes a major hurdle to educational progress for children from lower-income families—especially when they are legislatively prevented from being promoted from grade to grade (The Excellent Public Schools Act, 2021). Although the intent of the promotion restriction legislation and policy was good and intended to prevent social promotion, one result of such legislation has been that the disparity among children in relation to vocabulary and what I suggest are the subsequent effects on achievement—especially in reading—have been compounded. In North Carolina, the Read to Achieve program was “a part of the Excellent Public Schools Act which officially became law in July of 2012 and was implemented in all schools at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, p. 4). Article 8 of Chapter 115C of the North Carolina General Statutes includes Part 1A: North Carolina Read to Achieve Program. The state goal of this program “is to ensure that every student read at or above grade level by the end of third grade and continue to progress in reading proficiency so that he or she can read,

comprehend, integrate, and apply complex texts needed for secondary education and career success” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, p. 25).

In stark contrast to the state goal of the Read to Achieve program, according to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, only 36% of North Carolina Grade 4 students were proficient in reading (NAEP, 2019). Disaggregated, the data show disparities by race, ethnicity, and income. Forty percent (40%) of White children in North Carolina were reading proficiently, however, only 20% of Black children and 23% of Hispanic children were reading proficiently (NAEP, 2019). For North Carolina children who are eligible for free and reduced lunch (which encompasses 59% of students) only 21% were reading proficiently (NAEP, 2019).

Background of Problem of Practice

The word gap and its implications for Black male achievement in reading in LDES in first grade is the problem of practice that I will focus on for my study. LDES has a high Black male population and has consistently underperformed other schools in the district. Through analysis of diagnostic data, I intend to verify the existence of the word gap between the Black male students in Grade 1 and their White counterparts, identify possible correlates of the word gap, draw parallels between the word gap and student achievement in reading, and finally implement a potential solution. My study is of importance because of the long-term impact that a slow start with regards to vocabulary can have on student achievement and opportunities both in and beyond school (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Context of Study

Lucky Day Elementary School is located in Carolina County. Carolina County Public Schools is an urban school district located in southeastern United States. The district has 179

total schools and 160,000 students. Lucky Day Elementary School is 1 of 120 elementary schools. It has a high Black male population and has consistently underperformed other elementary schools in the district. The ethnic breakdown at LDES is consistent with the overall demographics of Carolina County Public Schools (CCPS, a pseudonym) as depicted in Table 1.

LDES is a K-5 Magnet School in a large urban district in southeastern United States. It is a Center for Global Studies and Spanish Immersion and our vision is to develop and nurture global citizens as we foster diverse relationships, build community, and inspire learners to discover how their strengths can positively impact the world. The Magnet School process in Carolina County Public Schools is designed with four objectives: Reduce high concentrations of poverty, promote school integration, maximize use of school facilities, and provide innovative and/or expanded educational opportunities. There is an application process to be accepted into the magnet program. All students in the school engage in the regular K-5 curriculum provided by the district as well as the magnet focus within the school.

As shown in Table 2, the Black male students at Lucky Day Elementary School performed below the district and the state levels on the state administered end-of-grade test, in grades 3-5 combined in reading.

Over the course of the past three years, LDES has been provided with various levels of support ranging from direct intervention from central services in CCPS to specific targeted assistance from a coordinating teacher assigned to LDES to work directly with the LDES literacy coach.

I selected LDES for my study because, as a district leader, I am in a position to make a positive impact on the problem of practice and based on overall student data which indicates a need to strengthen and support foundational skills and supplement daily instruction in a manner

Table 1

Ethnicity Breakdown

District/School	American Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	White
CCPSS	.3%	10.4%	22.4%	18.6%	.1%	3.9%	44.5%
LDES	-	8.2%	28.3%	22.9%	.6%	4.6%	35.3%

Table 2

Black Student Achievement at LDES Compared to District and State

Race	LDES	District	State
All	36%	58%	46%
Asian	43%	82%	72%
Black	18%	34%	29%
Hispanic	25%	33%	33%
White	65%	73%	59%

Note. 2020-2021 Grade level percent proficient / College and Career Ready (Levels 3, 4, & 5).

that is aligned to available resources and state standards. The instructional resources, content, and curriculum at LDES with respect to literacy development conform to the standard that is provided for the entire county (e.g., Letterland and EL Education). In addition, the teacher training for implementation as well as ongoing support for literacy instruction is provided for LDES in the same manner that it is provided for all other schools in the district. However, data suggest that there is a drastic difference in performance at LDES as compared to the remainder of the school district. Table 2 is a comparison between the achievement levels by student ethnicity at the county and school levels.

I stumbled upon Hart and Risley's (1995) research and formally titled my study based on a combination of their work and the direct correlation to the work that is doing with the focus on disproportionality (the disproportionate number of Black male students who are being referred for Special Education Services) with Black males. As mentioned earlier, the primary reason for my focus is to identify strategies to alleviate the word gap among Black male students in grade 1. Once identified, implemented, and found successful this strategy will provide support to teachers to reduce the disproportionate number of Black male students who are being referred for Special Education Services. When a student is referred to Special Education, there are several factors which impact this decision, however, ultimately students who are performing at a substantially lower rate than their peers are typically candidates for this referral. The literacy department in Carolina County in collaboration with Special Education services provides the K-2 literacy coaches in every elementary school in Carolina County with an intentional focus on reducing disproportionality. Specific steps include monthly professional learning for literacy coaches on instructional strategies for Black males, updates on changes in disproportionality by school, and professional learning on English Language Arts (ELA) content.

Table 3 depicts a 3-year trend of performance on the end of grade reading tests for grades 3-8 and High School EOC in CCPS. Table 4 depicts a 3-year trend of performance on the end of grade test for LDES. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that although Black students represent 22% of the student population in CCPS, they are performing at a considerably lower rate as compared to their counterparts on standardized tests in grades 3-8. Table 5 indicates that students in grade 1 at LDES is performing at a considerably lower rate with regards to the vocabulary component of the state administered diagnostic assessment and Black males at LDES are performing at an even lower rate than the district and the state. Why this is important is the direction correlation between the vocabulary component of the state administered diagnostic assessment and overall performance. In Figure 2, you will find that there is a direct correlation between vocabulary performance on the state administered diagnostic assessment and overall performance. That is, students who perform well on the vocabulary portion of the assessment will do well on the overall test. Understanding that the state mandates consistent standards for all and assuming that resources and instructional opportunities are consistent across the CCPS, it is evident that there is a need to supplement English Language Arts (ELA) support at LDES. This is apparent by the three year end of grade ELA performance outcomes at LDES as compared to the district. In 2016-17 performance was at 54.7%, in 2017-18 performance was at 55.9%, and in 2018-19 performance was at 51%. For CCPS the three-year end of grade ELA performance outcomes were, in 2016-17 it was 66.3%, in 2017-18 it was 65%, and in 2018-19 it was 64.8%. This puts LDES at an approximately 10% deficit with regards to ELA performance each year compared to district performance. Additionally, the vocabulary performance on the state administered diagnostic assessment comparing LDES and CCPS shows a need for ELA support. At the beginning of the 2021-22 school year CCPS first grade students out performed LDES by 11%

Table 3

3-Year Trend of Performance on the End of Grade Test for CCPS

Assessment	2016 - 2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Reading	66.3%	65%	64.8%
Math	63.3%	60.3%	62.8%
EOG	66.4%	64.6%	65.7%
EOC	65.5%	66.5%	63.3%

Note. Carolina County Public Schools End of Grade Test 3-Year Trend Data.

Table 4

3-Year Trend of Performance on the End of Grade Test for LDES

Subject	2016 - 2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Reading	54.7%	55.9%	51%
Math	62.6%	59.5%	56.3%

Note. Lucky Day Elementary School End of Grade Test 3-Year Trend Data.

Table 5

Grade 1 Data Comparison for Vocabulary Performance on mCLASS Assessment

Time of Year	CCPS	CCPS Black males	LDES	LDES Black males
BOY	60%	39%	49%	38%
EOY	56%	36%	44%	25%

Note. Black Male proficiency data on mCLASS 21-22 BOY and EOY for LDES, CCSS, LDES Black males, & CCSS Black males.

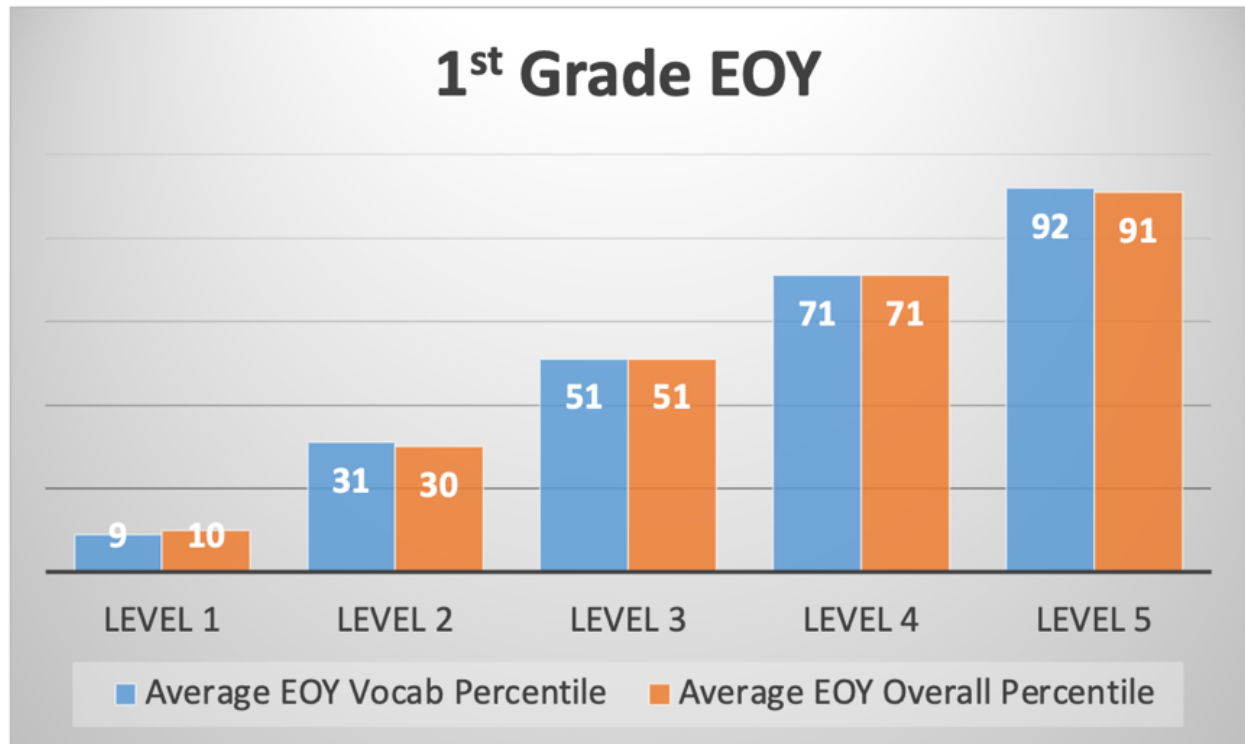


Figure 2. First grade diagnostic correlation between overall performance and vocabulary.

and outperformed them at EOY by 12%. The Black males in CCPS at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year out performed LDES by 1% and by the end of the year out performed LDES by 11%.

Focus of Problem of Practice

Although student achievement overall at LDES appears to need attention in the area of ELA, the focus of my study is the alleviation of the word gap among Black males in Grade 1 in LDES. Eighty percent (80%) of students that are struggling to read at the end of first grade continue to be struggling readers in fourth grade (Sparks et al., 2014). In addition, 90% of children with reading difficulties will achieve grade level in reading if they receive help by the first grade. (Vellutino et al., 1996). With that, in order to provide equitable access and achievement I propose working with teachers in one specific Grade 1 classroom who will implement specific strategies to supplement daily ELA instruction and provide the students with additional opportunities to practice the skills they are taught in ELA, increase vocabulary exposure, and ultimately improve student achievement.

I worked with the Principal at LDES to select a teacher for this study based on criteria which included willingness to participate, a diverse classroom population, and an experienced / seasoned teacher with 10+ years of experience. The teacher selected has a total of 12 years teaching experience. She began her career as a graduate of Shippensburg University with a degree in social work. Additionally she received a teaching certification and masters degree in education from Millersville University. Her experience in social work adds a lens understanding and compassion for equity in marginalized populations. Her initial experience was in inner city Philadelphia where she experienced many things ranging from politically motivated funding cuts to affordable housing constraints on families. Some of her earlier contributions included family

and community involvement efforts through at home visits and providing a free afterschool program for students in need. Our experiences are aligned to a degree as I am a product of the inner city school system. My experience in education as a teacher and building administrator has been all in Title 1, federally funded schools based on high free and reduced lunch numbers, schools. I too have spent a great deal of time managing afterschool programs and conducting at home family visits.

It is my sincere hope that this study will result in a notable increase in the vocabulary of Black. As a result, this study will provide educators with strategies yielding proven results to increase vocabulary attainment and help to reduce and eliminate the word gap.

Understanding that the education system has battled many unfair practices resulting in ideas such the achievement gap and affirmative action, the purpose of this study is to explore what strategies and practices might be implemented with Grade 1 Black males at LDES to explore the use of these strategies in lieu of current instruction or in addition to the current instructional practices.

Problem of Practice Study Questions

It is my hope that the two questions guiding my study focused on alleviating the word gap between Black males in Grade 1 in LDES and their White counterparts will bring attention to an ongoing issue which begins to surface at the onset of a student's educational experience. Table 6 outlines the evidence that will be used to support the problem of practice study questions. The questions which will guide my study are:

- Research Question 1: How does targeting professional development aligned to students' vocabulary development increase the quality of a teachers practice in teaching vocabulary?

Table 6

Table of Measures

Question	Measures
1. How does targeting professional development aligned to student's vocabulary development increase the quality of a teachers practice in teaching vocabulary?	Belief survey Teacher interview mCLASS assessment
2. How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in Black male students?	Teacher interview mCLASS assessment Student interest survey results Specific changes in practice

Note. Data obtained through various measurement instruments.

- Research Question 2: How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the black male students in her classroom?

Overview of Inquiry

To answer the questions in the previous section I intend to use an action research design approach to effect change within identified students who have demonstrated that they are affected by the word gap. More specifically I will use a practical action research approach (a process where educators can reflect, collect data, and create alternative ways to improve their instructional practices) in this study (Schmuck, 2009). My specific problem of practice that I will focus on is the existence of the word gap in Black males upon entry of school. With that given focus, I will select students as my case study to enact specific strategies aligned to vocabulary to decrease and eliminate the word gap.

Inquiry Partners

In order to effectively engage in this work I will collaborate with many stakeholders for this study. My role in Carolina County Public Schools is Director of Literacy. In this role provide support to Lucky Day Elementary School and Carolina County Public Schools in regards to literacy support, resources and professional development. Thus far I have worked with the principal at Lucky Day Elementary School to gather data on current state of achievement and vocabulary for minority males at Lucky Day Elementary. Along with the Principal, I will work with the literacy coach and instructional facilitator at Lucky Day Elementary School to monitor teacher and student progress as well as provide necessary coaching for the teacher. Perhaps the most important inquiry partner will be the classroom teacher. I will work closely with the teacher to provide necessary professional development in the areas of vocabulary and other aligned

instructional practices. The central office ELA team will play an integral role in this study as they will meet regularly with the teacher, coach, and IF to support with resources.

In addition, I intend to work with Voyager Sopris, to make necessary connections with the LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) professional development and vocabulary development. In 2022 North Carolina enacted SB387 as part of The Excellent Public Schools Act with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all students are reading on Grade Level by the end of third grade. As part of this legislation, Voyager Sopris was employed to provide LETRS professional learning to all teachers in grades K-5. In conjunction with Voyager Sopris, I will work with NCDPI in order to ensure that policy and legislation is followed with regards to K-5 literacy in the state of North Carolina.

Conceptual Framework

It is my belief that there are inequities that exist within our education system that begin years prior to entry into kindergarten. In my experience as a teacher and Principal, there are disparities within a kindergarten classroom ranging from a student who is unable to identify a letter to a fluent reader. Universal PreK is a concept that I believe would alleviate these disparities ultimately resulting in a reduction or elimination of the word gap. My study will be based on the conceptual framework in Figure 3. You will notice that I begin by focusing on Black males in grades K-5. Within this focus I will look at factors that impact the word gap in Black males. These include at home resources, SES, community mores, parental education, and meso socio expectations. I will explore how these factors affect literacy skills. More specifically, reading readiness, phonics ability, and vocabulary ultimately leading to the word gap. With that, I will consider instructional factors such as teacher ability along with instructional resources and instructional approaches that reduce the word gap.

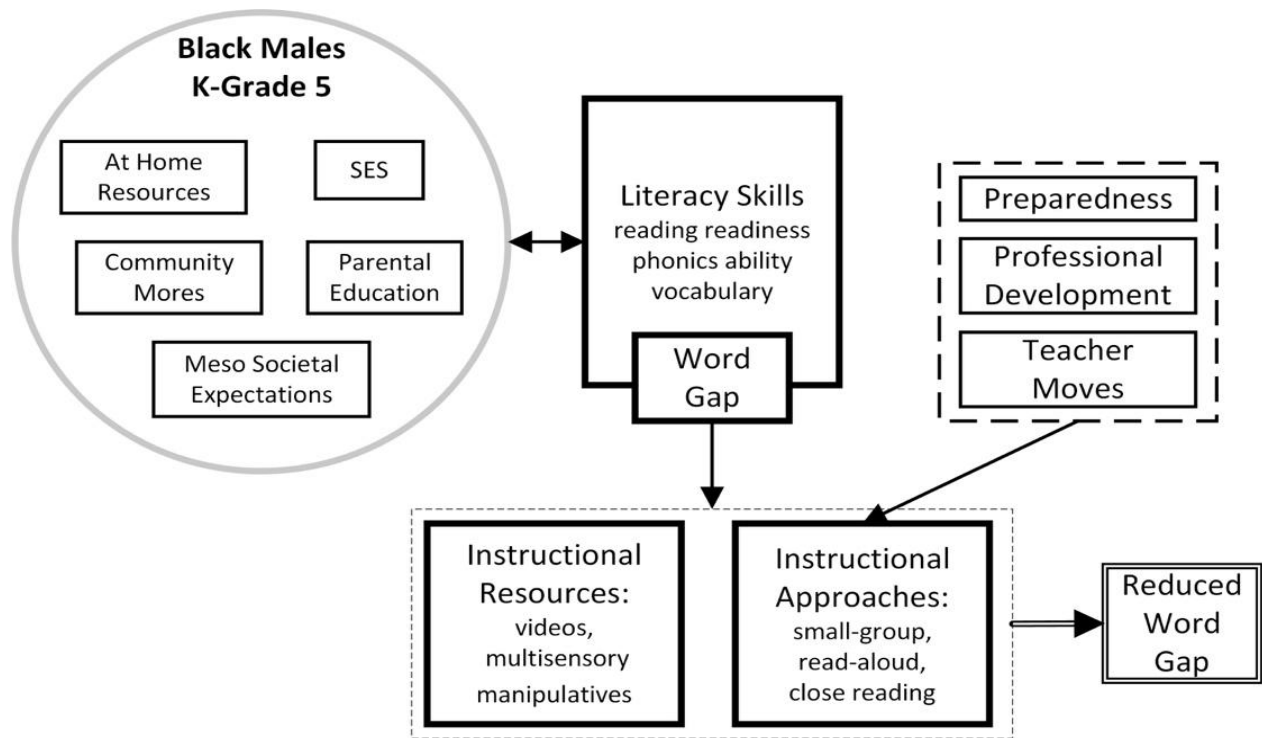


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are recurring points of reference throughout the study:

LETRS – Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling.

NCDPI – North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Word Gap – The existence of a difference in vocabulary across income groups (Hart & Risley, 1995).

The Excellent Public Schools Act – A North Carolina bill that establishes the Early Literacy Program within the Department of Public Instruction and states that NCDPI must use the Program to build strong foundational early literacy skills utilizing the Science of Reading to ensure that all students are reading on grade level by the end of Grade 3.

AIG – Academically and Intellectually Gifted.

ELA – English Language Arts.

Assumptions

Some natural assumptions that I will encounter in my study is that the information that I receive will be factual. When utilizing surveys or conducting interviews the expectation will be that responses will reflect honesty and truth. Information that is not factual could taint or alter the results of the study. Another assumption is that teachers will implement the strategies and resources provided as intended. When considering program evaluation, one of the most important components in the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) Evaluation Model is implementation or process evaluation. This asks the question, “is the solution effectively implemented”? If the solution is not implemented as intended, then you really would not have a true picture of its effectiveness. I will also assume that the teacher involved in the study will be keen to the professional development that they will be receiving. If a teacher does not buy into

the professional development then they are less likely to implement as intended. Finally, there will be an assumption that the professional development is well designed and effective for this purpose. Misalignment of professional development to the intended outcomes will lead to lack of preparation.

Scope and Delimitations

My research focus is the word gap that exists between Black males and their counterparts as a result of lack of exposure during their formative years. The scope of this work will be limited to a selected first grade classroom at Lucky Day Elementary School. More specifically, in collaboration with the Principal, we will select a first grade teacher based on data, to provide with professional learning and implementation strategies to improve vocabulary development.

Significance of Inquiry

This study will involve strategic and intentional implementation of resources based on student data, teacher professional development, and research based best practices. The Word Gap is a phenomenon that has put Black male students at a disadvantage upon entering grade school and unfortunately leaves them staggering behind. The numbers at Lucky Day Elementary school exemplify this disparity. It is my hope that this study will have a notable impact on the students and teachers involved at Lucky Day Elementary School. Specifically, I anticipate that what I will find is an increase in vocabulary performance of Black male students from the beginning-of-the-year diagnostic assessment to the end-of-the-year diagnostic assessment when comparing the 2021-22 school year results with the 2022-23 school year results. The reason this is significant is I hope to uncover specific strategies to impact increased vocabulary, these strategies could perhaps be implemented in other places to impact comparable change.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

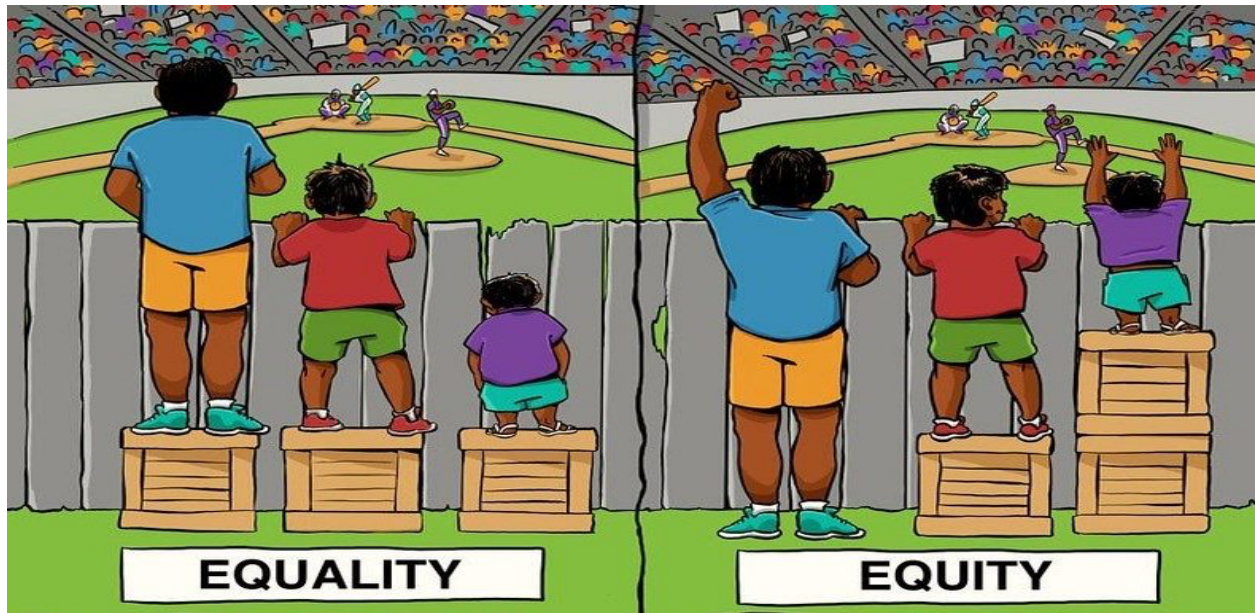
Impacting change on a large scale and over the long term is the ultimate goal of this study. This amounts to changes in practices overall. In order to ensure that we see different outcomes we have to first change our inputs (practices). In order for these practices to be equitable and positively impact all students they have to align with the individual needs of all students (see Figure 4). There are clear data to indicate that Black students are behind their counterparts in the area of vocabulary. With that in mind, we have to provide a different level of support to these students to bring them up to the level of achievement of their peers.

Advances in Practice

As mentioned earlier, ideally, I would like to see changes in my study that scale-up to a larger scale and longer term. Additionally, I would like to see changes in how we at Lucky Day Elementary School address individual student needs as they relate to vocabulary. There will need to be pedagogical shifts to advance our educational practices in order to ensure progress for all students.

Summary

In summary, preliminary data from Lucky Day Elementary School, Carolina County, and the State of North Carolina, along with research from the Word Gap study (Hart & Risley, 1995) indicate a need to provide additional support to our Black male students. Specifically, in order to close the word gap, Black male students need to be provided more intentional instruction to increase word knowledge to a level comparable to their counterparts. In Chapter 2, I will highlight specific research which supports the origin and existence of the word gap along with best practices and strategies to implement both in home and school to reduce and eliminate its



Note. This photo by unknown author is licensed under CC BY.

Figure 4. Equality vs. equity.

existence. I will follow in Chapter 3 with an in depth look at my research. Specifically, I will outline my next steps in my study and what I hope to accomplish both short-and long-term.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore factors that contribute to the curtailed vocabulary attainment of Black males upon entry into elementary school and how this contributes to their achievement in school and beyond. In my review of literature, I will make a connection in understanding the contributing factors and challenges faced by Black males both socially and academically. This review of the literature will consist of the following topics: the current state of the Black male, Black males in public education, contributing factors of Black male achievement and the word gap, and teacher behavior and student performance. I will dive deeper into research studies on reading to include a review of the literature related to effective instructional strategies in reading. In addition, the conclusion will present a discussion of the major themes found in the literature as well as a summary of the critical studies related to this topic. The research strategies used in conducting this literature review included finding peer-reviewed journal articles as well as other scholarly publications such as books, dissertation studies, and research reports.

Current State of Black Males

In order to adequately address the word gap, I feel it is important to have some context about the long-term and systemic ramifications of Black male student performance over time. This context will make the connection but more importantly it will highlight the importance of this study and the why. For many years, studies have focused on the less than desired state of Black males. In one example, an issue in the *Journal of Negro Education* focused on the under educational attainment of Black males (Joe & Davis, 2009; Rowley & Bowman, 2009). The long-term trend for Black males leaves them falling behind, when it comes to their income and

personal wealth, educational status, and high school graduation rates (Moore & Lewis, 2014). In addition, the percentages of Black males in prison and high school dropouts are astronomically disproportional to their percentage in the population (Moore & Lewis, 2014). Black males lead the nation in homicides, both as victims and perpetrators, and in addition, they now have the fastest growing rate for suicide. In the labor market, they are the least likely to be hired and in many cities, the most likely to be unemployed (Greer et al., 2022).

In a 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress Report, 14% of Black children scored proficient or above compared to 43% of White children, with this academic gap continuing from fourth to eighth grade. You will also find racial disparities in the population of students who are identified as gifted and talented. In most instances, Asian and White students are overrepresented in the gifted and talented classes compared to their Black peers. Specifically one 1997 K-12 Gifted and Talented data shows Asians and Whites comprised 3.1% and 64% of the PreK-12 classroom population but comprised 6.6% and 76.6% of the gifted and talented program. When you look at Black children comparatively, they made up 17% of the PreK-12 classroom population and were underrepresented in the gifted and talented program at 6.6%. Traditionally, boys are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs which therefore would mean that Black are underrepresented in this program. There are many factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of Black children in gifted and talented programs, including actual lower performance and the use of disciplinary practices that tend to be biased and not culturally responsive or relevant, which result in students being misjudged, overdisciplined, and Black males having their access to opportunities that address their strengths or needs restricted (National Research Council, 2002); teacher perception, and inability to recognize, refer, and identify gifted and talented Black males (McBee, 2006); use of inappropriate instruments to

gauge academic potential (i.e., using instruments that rely heavily on verbal skills to assess general cognitive abilities); and failure to use multiple sources of information and types of measures (Coleman & Shah-Coltrane, 2015). What is often not positively reflected in the literature are the many Black males who graduate from high school, attend college, graduate with college and advanced degrees, are identified as gifted and talented (Aud et al., 2010). More specifically, over 23% of Black males have some college education, with 16% of them with an undergraduate or graduate degree. The graduation rates for African American males tend to range from 47% to 80% as of 2007 (Aud et al., 2010).

Black Males in Public Education

Since the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision in 1954, educational gains in academic achievement for public school students have been monitored and recorded; with that, the trend in public education has been the overidentification of Black males often to special education or vocational nonacademic classes that are neither intellectual or challenging (Oakes, 1985). In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol (1991) identifies our educational system as being unequal. Specifically with regards to Black students, they overwhelmingly are instructed from teachers who lack experience, motivation, resources, and/or enthusiasm to effectively engage students in the learning process. Additionally, the majority of Black students attend school in facilities that physically unappealing and inferior when compared to their counterparts as well as both racially and economically isolated. Another unfortunate circumstance regarding teachers of Black male students is exposed by Scott et al. (2008) where they state that Black students are often educated by teachers of different ethnic, race, and cultural backgrounds. In fact, approximately 87% of the elementary, middle, and high school teachers are European American, while 8% of teachers in the same grade span are African American.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, there are several factors leading to the school to prison pipeline (The school to prison pipeline is a disturbing national trend wherein youth are funneled out of the public schools and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems). According to the ACLU (<https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/juvenile-justice-school-prison-pipeline>), these factors include inadequate resources in public schools, zero-tolerance behavior policies, and overly harsh disciplinary policies that push students down the pipeline and into the juvenile justice system. In addition to factors mentioned by ACLU, academic disconnection, a lack of connection with learning, critically hurts Black male students' academic performance and causes withdrawal from school, dropping out, or delinquency (Hawkins-Jone & Reeves, 2020). Black male students, in particular-experience higher levels of academic disconnection, which has been proven to cause or contribute to low performance. Winn and Behizadeh (2011) contend that childhood poverty, the lack of early childhood education, and the denial of a college-preparatory K–12 education promoting critical literacies have contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, if youth in underserved and underperforming schools were lead by the belief that literacy is a right as opposed to schools that focus more on discipline policies as opposed to academic rigor they would benefit and thrive academically (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). “Unequal life chances” among America’s children and the denial of literacy as a civil right are two ways African American and Latino youth are placed into the school-to-prison pipeline (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). The reality that we find when we examine issues such as lack of preparation, dropout rates, and the discipline or punishment gap is that they help contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Those who are subject to this pipeline, hear a message that their lives are disposable and that detention centers, jails, and prisons have somehow become an expected part of their life cycle. In order to disrupt this fate, specific

practices that focus on collaborating with youth to foster critical literacy, such as students performing their writing, students conducting research with adult allies, and students having forums where their voices, ideas, and lived experiences can be heard should be considered (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011).

According to the NAEP (2005) report it was indicated that the average reading scale score for Black eighth grade students was 243 while the average for European American eighth graders was 271. In addition, studies have noted that different learning opportunities result in differing achievement outcomes for students. In “From Kindergarten through Third Grade”, Rathbun et al. (2004) noted that Black children were found to have lower overall reading achievement scores than other ethnic groups. They also noted that in addition to low achievement, Black male students are found at the top of the list of every indicator of school failure, including dropout, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion. Johnson (2008) maintained that Black male students need specific things in order to achieve success academically. They must have guidance and an opportunity to develop a positive sense of self and ethnic identity and they have to come to see themselves as intellectually and effectively competent in both academic and social circles. In order to receive this guidance, the adults in the building must believe that they are capable.

Lack of funding and adequate resources in high poverty schools help attribute to the lack of preparation to be successful academically. In 1994, five school districts in low-wealth counties along with families filed a lawsuit against the state (Leandro v. State of North Carolina, 1997) arguing that their school districts did not have enough money to provide an equal education for their children, despite the fact that they taxed their residents high than average. The Supreme Court ruled that North Carolina has a constitutional obligation to ensure all children

have access to a sound basic education that includes competent and well-trained teachers and principals, as well as equitable access to sufficient resources.

In his work, Kunjufu (1986) believed that the public school system contributes most to the destruction of the Black male. He went on to claim that educational institutions have established policies and practices that limit Black males from equal access to high-quality educational experiences. These policies include but are not limited to legislation, tracking, special education, and standardized testing. Some of the behaviors that teachers use to refer students to special education are being off-task during assignments, poor attention span, lack of attention span, and being passive aggressive (Natesan et al., 2008). Unfortunately these behaviors are often misunderstood and misinterpreted and the result of this misunderstanding causes teachers to easily give up on their students, lower expectations, and focus their attention on referring the students to special education. In addition, Kunjufu notes that the underachievement of the Black male student begins as early as the fourth grade. In a study, Holland (1991) highlights the academic and social challenges that Black male students face. For example, from 1986 to 1987, Black male students represented 48% of the public-school population; however, they accounted for 57.7% of grade level retentions, 65% of suspensions, 80% of expulsions, and 45% of dropouts. With that, Holland (1991) came to three conclusions: (a) of the 1,470 retained first graders, 817 were Black male students; (b) of the 768 retained second graders, 440 were Black male students; and (c) of the 716 retained third graders, 438 were Black male students. With that, policy practices, the social organization of schools, grouping practices, curriculum choices, and methods of instruction are rooted in the beliefs about how the differences between and among students should be addressed. According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), educators and legislatures acquired a belief that Black male students had

unwarranted discipline problems and academic deficiencies. As a result, this perspective results in a disproportionate number of Black male students mislabeled as mentally retarded, assigned to special education classes, and frequently identified as discipline problems.

In his study, Irvine (1990) introduced the concept of cultural synchronization, which is the understanding and assimilated value of different cultures as it relates to teacher perceptions of student achievement and social issues, as a critical component of motivating Black students to achieve. According to Irvine, studies investigating teacher-student interactions within the classroom indicate that race/ethnicity, gender, and social class can influence learning. To be more specific, an experienced and effective teacher of any racial background is more preferable for Black male students than an ineffective teacher of Black decent. In addition, Fashola (2005) notes that a Black teacher who educates Black males has several important advantages, including modeling appropriate behavior, using shared knowledge strategically, building on common social experiences, providing value-added interest in academic and non-academic subjects, and establishing rapport with Black male students.

One of the major reasons cited for the lack of engagement of Black males in the schooling process is the feeling that there is no connection to the institution itself. According to Tatum (2005), for many Black male students, school is viewed as a place where they feel unknown, unconnected, and where they experience failure. Lee and Loeb (2000) suggested a strategy from a systems and structures standpoint that could support Black male student achievement. They recommend breaking large schools down into smaller learning communities by establishing interdisciplinary teams of teachers with common planning time which will allow new patterns of relationships to develop. For example, when large poorly managed schools are restructured into self-contained, smaller communities, expectations for teachers and students can

be altered as a result of the structural shift. The impact of these smaller schools on the achievement particularly for Black male students is critical, due to the bonding element in terms of day-to-day interaction with students. Lee and Loeb also noted that one-on-one relationships between educators and students facilitate the creation of a new culture and climate within the school. This shift will address the sense of belonging that is felt to be missing by Black male students within the educational environment.

Fashola (2005) argued that providing educational after-school programs in a school-based setting provides Black male students with qualified teachers and trained staff who can work with much smaller groups of children to enrich their experiences in the areas of academic, cultures, and social interaction with peers. Fashola noted that structured after school programs, flexibility of choice, positive environments, and continuous evaluation of program goals contribute to positive outcomes in afterschool settings. In a study evaluating the effectiveness of after school programs using the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT) and the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA), students at the end of the 2-year program increased daily attendance, decreased discipline referrals, and had no suspensions or expulsions (Martin et al., 2007). Therefore, in serving Black male students in the after-school settings, Fashola pointed out that it is important to understand the following psychological process: (a) the first step involves understanding the feelings of the Black male child and the factors that foster feelings of failure and isolation, (b) the second step is to identify factors in the school setting that may or may not create these feelings and to ensure the behavioral results of these factors, and (c) the third step is to find alternatives that will bring together the targeted population and the service providers and create dynamics of academic success. In another study, Hudley (1992) addressed the causes of feelings of academic inadequacy and of academic success in Black male students. Hudley

examined the feelings of pride, anger, and guilt among school-aged Black male students, ages 16 to 19, and found that individual success in situations outside of school prevailed over school or academic success as a source of pride. Hudley also found that Black students who were placed in positions of responsibility elicited success. Fashola (2005) highlights that after-school programs seeking to develop the talents of Black male students should possess a deep understanding of the populations that they work with and attempt to understand effective ways to stimulate students cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. For example, there is evidence suggesting that after-school programs can have significant positive effects on social adjustments, social skills, and academic achievement. Analysis of the effects of after-school programs on Black students showed that students who had been involved in after-school programs performed better at the end of the year in reading, math, and other subjects and had better conduct. In addition, positive staff members and positive peer interactions positively influenced the transition of Black male students from the regular school day to the after-school program.

Contributing Factors to the Word Gap

Lack of Early Foundational Skills

In most instances the achievement gap findings for low-income Black children is already present in kindergarten, due in part to limited opportunities for acquiring foundational skills necessary for school success (Calzada et al., 2015). Past Studies have shown differences, prior to kindergarten entry, with African American boys; they are seen as less academically prepared compared to their White peers, especially in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills (Moore & Lewis, 2014).

Lack of classroom participation and poor performance are directly aligned to school preparation. When students are adequately prepared to enter school and engage in the learning

process, this confidence increases participation and engagement, which results in high achievement. According to Finn's participation–identification model of engagement (see Figure 4), participation facilitates positive academic performance, which in turn promotes a sense of belonging and identification with school and learning; belonging and identification then promote ongoing participation. In order to participate initially, students must feel that they have the skills and foundation to engage in learning successfully. Opportunities for participation change as students progress through the educational system. Initially, successful participation may involve attending school and being prepared for class; in later years, class preparation requires greater effort (e.g., homework, outside projects), and there are more opportunities to participate in nonacademic aspects of school, such as band, clubs, or other extracurricular activities (see Figure 5).

Ideally, a student will arrive at school initially with the attitudes, behaviors, and skills necessary to be successful in the school environment. They participate, are successful, identify with school and feel like they belong, and continue to participate. Although these students may encounter some difficulties along the way, the cycle of participation–success–belonging–participation begins with adequate preparation initially beginning school and if appropriately nurtured along the way, continues as expected, placing students on the path toward successful school completion (Reschly, 2009).

However, some students do not enter school with the requisite behaviors and skills necessary for successful participation and academic performance (Reschly, 2009). In this instance, over time, the cycle of participation and identification/belonging at school and with learning erodes. These students are less successful when they participate and eventually are less likely to demonstrate increased and varied forms of participation in the school environment.

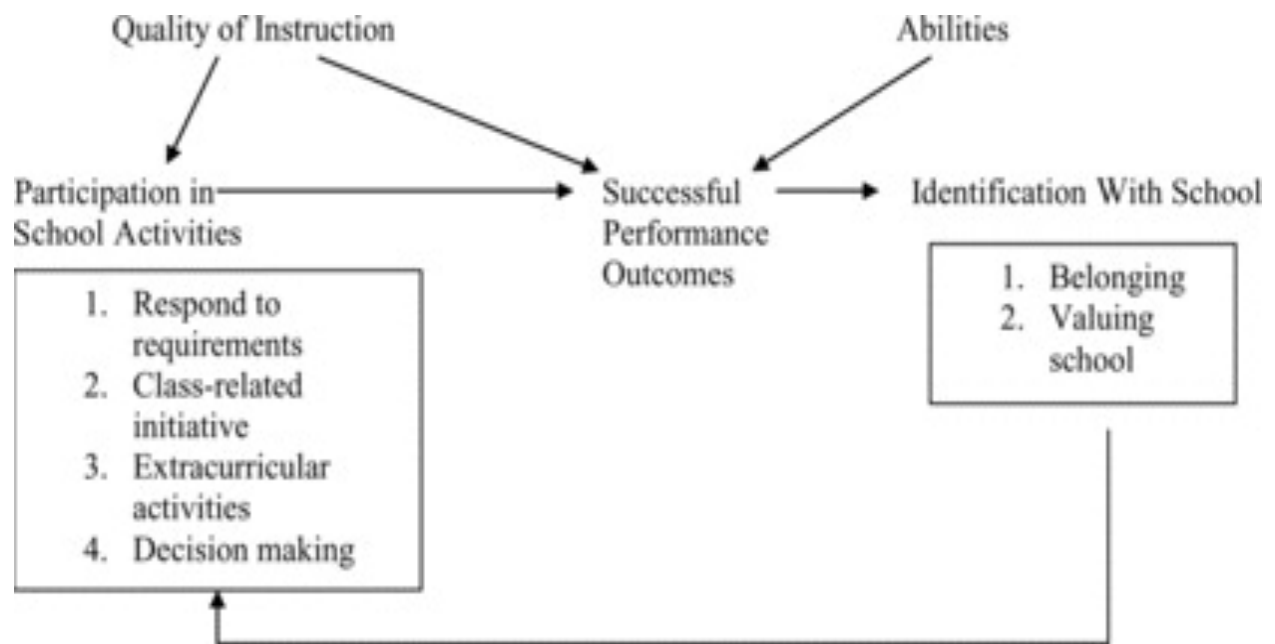


Figure 5. Finn's participation–identification model of engagement.

They are therefore more likely to develop feelings of alienation. Over years, this process can be characterized as one of gradual disengagement from the school environment that, if not addressed, may culminate in the student dropping out of school (Reschly, 2009).

Reading proficiency is a cumulative process that develops from birth and is rooted in early brain development long before a child enters kindergarten (The Campaign For Grade Level Reading, 2022). Early literacy and later reading success are linked as a young child's ability to talk, listen and understand spoken and written words leads to later literacy achievement in reading, writing, and spelling (The Campaign For Grade Level Reading, 2022). Reading in the early grades predicts high school success. Those who read well go on to graduate, but those who aren't reading well by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school (NAEP, 2019). According to the 2019 NAEP Report, only 36% of NC 4th graders are proficient in reading. Disaggregated, the data clearly shows disparities by race, ethnicity, and income. Forty percent (40%) of White children in NC are reading proficiently, however, only 20% of Black children and 23% of Hispanic children are reading proficiently. For NC children who are eligible for free or reduced lunch (which encompasses 59% of students) only 21% are reading proficiently. Nationally, students in higher-income families are making gains at a rate nearly twice that of students in low-income families. White male students nationwide are three times more likely to be reading proficiently in the fourth grade than their African-American peers, and more than twice as likely to be reading proficiently as Hispanic boys (NAEP, 2019).

School Readiness

Just as there is an achievement gap in school performance, there is also a school readiness gap that exists and similarly separates low-socioeconomic children from their more affluent peers. O'Donnell et al. (2008) found that as early as 18 months, low-income children begin to

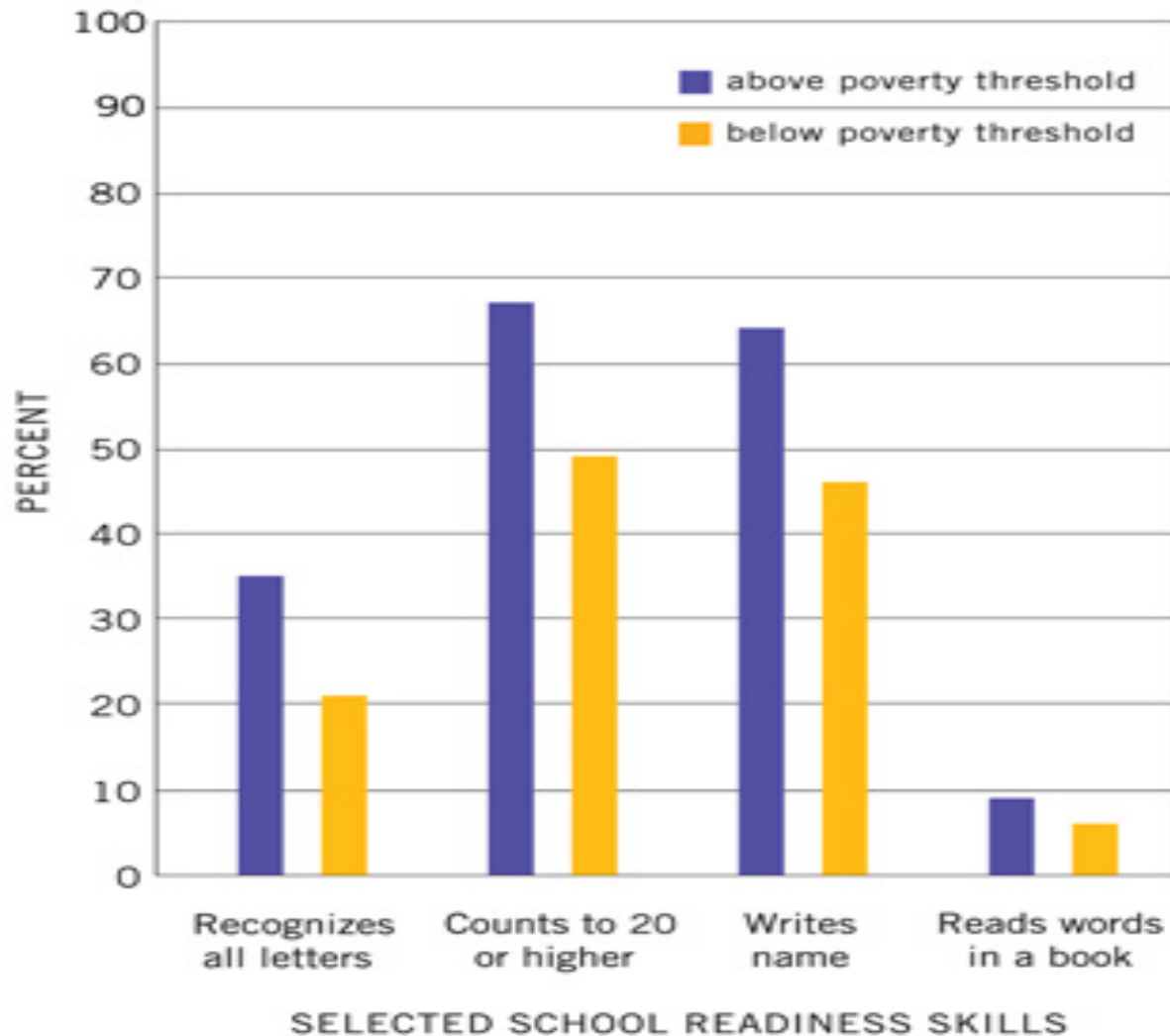
fall behind in vocabulary development and other skills critical for school success. Parents, daycare providers, preschools, and the community all play a role in closing this gap. Some factors that impact this lack in readiness include:

1. Sixty-one percent (61%) of low-income children have no children's books at home.
2. By age 2, poor children are already behind their peers in listening, counting, and other skills essential to literacy.
3. By age 5, a typical middle-class child recognizes 22 letters of the alphabet, compared to 9 for a child from a low-income family.

This study, highlighted in Figure 6, shows that learning begins long before a child enters kindergarten. Children, even infants soak up words, rhymes, songs, and images. Vocabulary development is particularly important. A child's health, and the timely recognition of developmental delays, is another critical aspect of school readiness. Doctors, care providers, and preschool teachers play a key role (O'Donnell et al., 2008).

Where letter sound recognition, counting, reading, and writing are all factors that contribute to the lack of school readiness, one additional factor connected to school readiness is vocabulary (Child Trends, 2012). Reading is broken down into five main areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In order for a student to learn to read successfully and experience reading success, all five components must be in acquired, in place, and functioning well (The Brain Recovery Project, 2018). Vocabulary is knowing the meanings and pronunciations of words (The Brain Recovery Project, 2018). For example, the word shop can mean: a store, supermarket, boutique, as well as to browse, purchase, buy, look for. Vocabulary is broken down into two main parts: *Expressive vocabulary*: words the child uses to express himself when speaking or writing. This includes speaking vocabulary and writing

**Percentage of Children Ages 3–6
With Selected School Readiness Skills,
by Poverty Status**



Source: O'Donnell, Kevin. Parents' Reports of the School Readiness of Young Children from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007, Table 2. National Center for Education Statistics. August 2008. www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/291

Figure 6. Selected school readiness skills.

vocabulary (The Brain Recovery Project, 2018). Speaking vocabulary is the words we use when we speak. Our speaking vocabulary is relatively limited! Most adults use only 5,000 to 10,000 words for all their conversations and instructions. Writing vocabulary are words we use when we write and is largely dependent spelling ability. *Receptive vocabulary*: All words understood by the child, including spoken, written, or signed words (The Brain Recovery Project, 2018). These include listening and reading vocabulary. Listening vocabulary are words we understand. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us will recognize and understand close to 50,000 words (The Brain Recovery Project, 2018). Reading vocabulary are words we understand when we read text or sign language.

One of the most influential studies regarding the impact of the acquisition of words during the early years was done by Hart and Risley (2003). The 30-million-word gap is a term that refers to the fewer number of words that children from lower-income families heard compared to their age peers in more affluent families. According to Hart and Risley children in lower income families heard 30 million fewer words than children from higher-income families hear by the time they were 4 years old. The official title of their study, *The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3*. Initially, Hart and Risley set out to take a deeper look at the home targeting two things in mind; What difference does home-life make in a child's ability to communicate and what are the alarming vocabulary gaps between high school student from low and high income environments seemingly foreshadowed by their performance in preschool?

In their study, researchers Hart and Risley (2003) entered the homes of 42 families from various socio-economic backgrounds to assess the ways in which daily exchanges between a parent and child shape language and vocabulary development. They found disparities between the number of words spoken as well as the types of messages conveyed. After a four year span

the differences that they found produced even more discrepancies in children's knowledge as well as their skills and experiences with children from high-income families being exposed to 30 million more words than children from families on welfare. Eighty-six percent (86%) to 98% of the words used by each child by the age of three were derived from their parents' vocabularies. In addition it was found that the words that the children used were identical to the words of their parents as well as the average number of words utilized, the duration of their conversations, and the speech patterns. Children from families on welfare heard about 616 words per hour, while those from working class families heard around 1,251 words per hour, and those from professional families hear roughly 2,153 words per hour.

The Hart and Risley (2003) study sparked many questions and motivated further studies to either support or deny the claim that children from low-socioeconomic homes hear far fewer words from their parents than their age peers in high-socioeconomic homes. In their study, Golinkoff et al. (2019) highlights the fact that language is causally implicated in most of what children learn in the first years of life. They drew attention to the finding that kindergarten language scores are the single best predictor of school achievement in all subjects in third and fifth grade (Golinkoff et al., 2019). Further, they asserted, children who have better language have better self-control.

In the Language in Little Ones study it was found that a socioeconomic word gap emerges between the ages of 12 and 18 months (Brushe et al., 2020). Families from low educated backgrounds decreased the amount they spoke to their children between 6 and 18 months, compared to families from high educated backgrounds whose quantity of talk remained the same during the same period. This lack of language exposure would have to have a long term impact on vocabulary acquisition because mathematically there is a group of children hearing

and internalizing fewer words. This finding suggests that early interventions and implementation of consistent early universal programs that encourage parents to talk more to their child should occur prior to 18 months of age (Brushe et al., 2020).

Beliefs, Teacher Behavior, and Student Performance

Raz and Beatty (2018) argue for a universal, non-stigmatizing approach to enhancing childhood literacy and propose using a positive framework of language building to replace the concept of a word gap (Raz & Beatty, 2018). Raz and Beatty (2018) do not outright refute the idea that a word gap exists, rather their concern is with the stigmatizing apparent within the study and the negative impact that it may have on teacher beliefs and expectations. Researchers found evidence that reliance on the concept of a word gap negatively impacted how educators viewed children of low income, minority children, and children who are linguistically diverse (Raz & Beatty, 2018).

According to Henson (2002), the social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1997) assumes that people are capable of intentional pursuit of courses of action which operates in a process called triadic reciprocal causation. With that, efficacy beliefs are best measured in degrees from high to low. Individuals with high efficacy beliefs about their ability to successfully complete given tasks will generally perform well on these tasks while others with lower efficacy beliefs for specific tasks tend to become idle or give up when faced with these tasks (Schunk, 2000). Schunk found that efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies are task specific and that both these beliefs and expectancies may be manipulated and controlled. Thus, when an individual with low efficacy beliefs is expected to perform well at a task that carries a high expectancy, the result is often poor performance, resulting in additional stress to the individual. However, Schunk argued, because these beliefs and expectancies may be controlled

or manipulated, it is possible to create an environment in which individual beliefs may be changed from low to high, and outcome expectancies may be changed in the same way.

The study of efficacy beliefs has led to findings, Henson (2002) argued, that self-efficacy beliefs are related to academic performance and self-regulated learning. Teacher beliefs have been found to develop over time as specific tasks are completed. Henson also noted that experienced teachers often find it hard to alter their efficacy beliefs because these beliefs have become solidified after years of teaching; on the other hand, pre-service and inexperienced teachers typically find it easier to alter their efficacy beliefs.

Teachers with low efficacy beliefs often find it difficult to teach to the individual needs of their students. The learning challenges of students can be seen insurmountable, and as Kruger (1997) suggested, a teacher's attitude toward such challenges often impedes the resolution. In contrast, teachers who were found to be highly efficacious in their teaching beliefs and strategies typically found it easier to both confront and correct educational pitfalls in the classroom (Ashington, 1984). Henson (2002) noted that teachers with higher senses of self-efficacy tended to experiment with methods of instruction, sought improved teaching methods, and experimented with methods of instruction materials.

Pintrich and Schunk (1996), in their research on the efficacy beliefs of students, suggested that showing an interest in schools tasks, becoming excited about tasks, and thinking about these tasks are indicators of student motivation. According to Pajares and Miller (1994), when a student's self-concept, or belief about ability, is presented on an efficacy belief scale, efficacy measures, unlike self-concept, tend to predict outcomes. Zimmerman (2000) argued that highly efficacious students possess characteristics such as persistence, diligence, and a strong willingness to participate in class activities leading to more learning and better achievement.

Students with high academic and self-efficacy are more likely to ask for help and are not fearful that other students will label them as incapable (Marchland & Skinner, 2007). In addition, Johnson (2005) argued that instructional activities that require students to set goals will help facilitate self-evaluation, and tracking progress will increase student self-efficacy.

Much of the current research in the area of reading instruction has focused on the role of comprehension, and some of the studies on teacher self-efficacy have contributed to improved proficiency of readers (Bandura, 1997; Ladson-Billing, 1994; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). In relationship to self-efficacy regarding reading motivation, a study was conducted using the Early Literacy Motivation Scale (ELMS). Wilson and Training (2007) found that cross factor correlations indicated a significant relationship between self-efficacy and self-perceptions in reading for the primary grades. Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) also found that students who become proficient readers do so through multiple comprehension strategies. They concluded that successful modeling of comprehension strategies by the teacher leads to eventual self-selection of reading strategies that help students become avid and fluent readers. According to Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003), teacher self-efficacy has also been linked to student ability to appropriately select and execute reading and comprehension strategies. In addition, Allington (2001) noted that highly efficacious teachers are more likely to be in environments that are conducive to successful reading comprehension strategy instruction and to achieve success with their students on standardized test. According to Vygotsky (1978), humans use tools, such as speech and writing that are developed from their culture to mediate their social environments. Initially children develop these tools to serve solely as social functions and as ways to communicate needs; however, Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools would lead to the use of higher thinking skills. This idea is also connected to variables associated with

student ability to perform under adult guidance. In fact, a study by Johnson and Johnson (1989) on teacher and student efficacy involving 42 teachers and 400 students concluded that the expectations set by the teacher with strong beliefs made a significant difference with scores ranging from .7076 to .7904 relating to efficacy beliefs. The outcome expectancies had scores of .6166 to .8706. Table 7 describes this teacher efficacy in relation to student outcomes.

Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) also cited teacher expectations as a part of the Pygmalion effect in helping Grade 1 and 2 students reach high academic expectations. However, the pattern was not as evident for students in Grades 3 to 6. Thernstrom and Thernstrom cited a Harris survey indicating that 80% of teachers in schools with at least a 66% minority student population believed that all children can learn as compared with 82% of those in schools with fewer minority students. The Pygmalion Effect also has a vicious effect on students who do not believe that their teachers think they can learn. For example, the Harris survey highlighted the negative perception of teacher influence, stating that 42% of African American students do not believe teachers care about the quality of work they present while only 36% of European American students believe that teachers are not concerned about the quality of work presented. Furthermore, lower expectations can lower self-esteem and alienate students from school. For example, in one study in Tennessee, student achievement was found to be higher for students who were assigned to teachers of the same ethnic background. A study of K-3 students found that African American students who had African American teachers outperformed those students in reading and math who had European American teachers by 4 to 5 percentile points (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Table 7

Teacher Efficacy and Student Outcomes in Reading

Efficacy and Outcomes	Student	Teacher
Efficacy beliefs		
Prior knowledge	.7076	.7786
Self-monitoring	.7045	.8853
Cooperative learning	.8849	.7328
Graphic organizers	.8183	.7904
Outcome expectancies		
Prior knowledge	.6166	.7403
Self-monitoring	.6658	.7403
Cooperative learning	.7790	.8189
Graphic organizers	.7739	.8706

Note. Values indicate standard error of relationships regarding teacher efficacy and student outcomes. (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

According to Fashola (2005), there are three types of bias in the perceptions and expectations of teachers that contribute to the academic achievement of African American male students: unconditional race neutral, conditional race neutral, and conditioned or unobserved potential. Unconditional race neutrality requires that perceptions, expectations, and behaviors be uncorrelated with race. By this definition, an unbiased perception, expectation, or treatment has the same average value for all racial groups. This benchmark for racial bias is the standard in experimental studies. The typical findings in such studies are that teachers are racially biased. Racial neutrality conditioned assumes that a teacher's perceptions or expectations are unbiased if they are based on legitimate observable predictors of performance, such as student's past grades, test grades, attitudes about school, and beliefs about personal ability. The benchmark in this case is only conditionally race neutral; if past performance is correlated with race, so will the benchmark. According to Fashola, bias is the difference between the actual perception or expectation and the benchmark. Racial neutrality conditioned on potential is the bias of the perception or estimation of a person's full potential. The full potential benchmark equals demonstrated plus latent potential. The alleged racial bias is that people underestimate latent potential more for African Americans than European Americans. Fashola argued that this self-fulfilling prophecy is a type of bias that is based on expectations that sustain past trends.

In another study, Jussim et al. (1996) examined how racial differences impact teacher perceptions on test scores. Teacher perceptions of the current performance, talent, and effort in math of 1,664 sixth graders were collected during the 1982-1983 school year by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. Jussim et al. (1996) found no evidence of racial bias; the coefficient on student race was small and insignificant. However, the estimated impact of teacher perceptions was almost three times greater for African Americans as for European Americans.

Furthermore, Jussim et al. (1996) found that the effects were cumulative for disadvantaged or stigmatized students; African American children from low-income backgrounds experienced the effects of both race and income.

Weinstein (1985) also found that teachers were less flexible in their expectations for African American, females and for students from low-income households. Weinstein speculated that minority status may play a role in the vulnerability with which students respond to teacher expectations. He also argued that differences in cultural values may serve to immunize some children from the impact of teacher views of their performance or heighten their susceptibility to the dominant viewpoint. A series of experiments were conducted by Taylor (1979) to analyze the treatment of African American students by college students in teacher training. Taylor found that when these phantom students were defined as African American, they received briefer feedback after mistakes, less positive feedback after correct responses, and fewer helpful hints. Taylor noted that each of these experimental studies suggested that some teachers may be helping European Americans more than African Americans, and the difference may be large enough to have non-trivial effects on performance.

Strategies for Success

There are many factors pointing to various reasons for the disproportionate number of Black males that have low achievement academically in schools, have high incidences of discipline and suspension in schools, and ultimately result in suspension. Providing ongoing cultural proficiency training designed to help teachers and administrators with African American males (e.g., how to be more patient with, supportive of, and personable and caring toward them; how to be more evenhanded in discipline) could potentially pay dividends of improved Black

male achievement, teacher–student relationships, and boys’ perceptions of their schools (Greer et al., 2022).

Learning Forward, the professional learning association, identifies three specific factors that must be included in quality professional development. These factors are rigorous content for each learner, transformational processes, and conditions for success (Learning Forward, 2022). In my study I would like to explore and address this issue with strategic professional learning and implementation of intentional vocabulary strategies targeted at a group of Black males in first grade. In my study I chose to address this issue in this manner because of the impressionable age and grade of a first grade student as well as the vital point that this grade is critical to language and vocabulary acquisition. In addition, there is research to support that Black males benefit from instruction and interventions focused on discrete reading skills, supplemental reading instruction, and research-based practices found to have a positive effect size on reading, writing, and language development (Tatum et al., 2021). North Carolina legislators have recognized this and have taken measures to provide consistency statewide with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all students are reading on or above grade level by the end of third grade. The Read to Achieve legislation includes seven components to ensure that the goal of this legislation is met (NCDPI, 2021). These components are: Comprehensive Plan for Reading Achievement, Early Learning Inventory, Facilitating Early Grade Reading Proficiency, Elimination of Social Promotion, Successful Reading Development for Retained Students, Notification Requirements to Parents and students, and Accountability Measures. In an act to modify the original law the NC Senate enacted SB387 (The Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021) designed specifically to include professional development for all PreK-5 teachers on the Science of Reading (North Carolina Read to Achieve Law, 2021). LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading

and Spelling) is the designated professional learning that will be provided by Voyager Sopris to all stakeholders included in the legislation.

The implementation of LETRS is a strategy included in the Read to Achieve legislation. As the legislation's main objective is to ensure that all students are reading proficiently on grade level by the end of third grade. LETRS strengthens teachers' knowledge of language structure, the development of the reading brain, and how to nurture the development of foundational literacy skills such as decoding and language comprehension. Research shows that only 35% of students are reading proficiently, but 95% of students CAN learn to read. And while teachers are the most essential factor in student success, only about half of teaching institutions effectively prepare teachers for literacy instruction. *LETRS* training is an investment in teachers' literacy knowledge as teachers gain essential skills to master the fundamentals of literacy instruction required to apply and transform student learning. In addition, LETRS for Early Childhood Educators (PreK teachers) provides deep knowledge of literacy instruction for the youngest learners. The more children know about language and literacy before they begin kindergarten and first grade, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading and beyond (Moats et al., 2019).

Based on Hart and Risley's study, Laura Colker highlights specific early interventions to address the issue of the word gap (Colker, 2014). Specifically she names the following strategies to help preschoolers build their vocabulary:

- Use new and interesting words in natural conversations.
- Use gestures and facial expressions to help children make sense of new words.
- Sing with children and recite poetry and rhymes to introduce vocabulary.
- Talk with children and encourage children to talk with one another.

- Read to children daily, taking time to go over new words.
- Look for books with illustrations that provide clues to word meanings.
- Think about new vocabulary words that might come up on a field trip.
- Give children ample time to learn the meaning and uses of new words.
- Encourage families to talk with their children and share new vocabulary words.
- Make sure that all children have opportunities to learn and understand new words.

In addressing why the 30-million-word gap should not be abandoned, Golinkoff et al. (2019) addressed three issues: whether there is a language gap; the characteristics of speech that promote language development; and the importance of language in school achievement. They emphasized both language exposure as well as intentionality of words shared as opposed to simple exposure to overheard words. To their way of thinking, overheard speech does not support early language learning because language growth requires much more than words passing children's ears. Exposure to overheard speech will not contribute to closing the persistent, average language lag found between children from lower income homes and those from middle-and upper-income homes. They referred to what were then new analyses of child directed speech that suggested that quantity per se is not as useful to young children as is the quality of speech. For example, when parents read to children and talk to them about the focus of their attention, children acquire more than just language. They acquire concepts and general knowledge that are essential to listening and reading comprehension. In this way, caregivers' conversations with children impact early language learning, school readiness, and ultimately school success. The emphasis, Golinkoff et al. asserted, should be on creating interventions in which nurturing adults converse with children on topics of interest to the children; overheard speech lacks the richness necessary for helping children link the language they hear to the world.

Many studies related to The Word Gap focus on vocabulary development through conversations. In “When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap,” Logan et al. (2019) researched another avenue by which words are acquired. Children’s book reading sessions have demonstrated significant correlational and causal influences on children’s vocabulary development, however national data suggest that around 25% of caregivers never read with their children. Further, in a sample of 8,900 children aged 4 years, about one-fourth of children were reportedly never read to (23%), about one-fourth were read to seldom (once or twice weekly), and the remainder were read to 3 or more times per week.

The aim of the Logan et al. (2019) study was to determine how the variability in home-reading frequency potentially contributed to the Word Gap. Their study included three specific areas of focus: determining how many words children hear during a typical reading session, identifying general patterns of home-reading frequency for children from birth to 5 years of age, and calculating the expected differences in word exposure in the first 5 years as a function of these general patterns. Their findings estimated that children who are never read to are exposed to nearly 300,000 words fewer than children who are read to once daily from birth to 5 years of age. In addition, the difference in word exposure for children who are never or infrequently read to and children who are read to multiple times each day corresponded to a difference in the cumulative word exposure of well over 1,000,000 words.

Based on findings from their study, Logan et al. (2019) suggested that adult-child shared book reading during the first 5 years of life may help to eradicate the Word Gap. They proposed that adult-child shared reading provided a context for joint engagement, which served as a conduit for vocabulary development, and offered a richer lexical reservoir compared with adult-child conversations.

Interventions that affect children’s vocabulary development focus on the quality of language as well as quantity. Children need opportunities to talk, use vocabulary words, and respond to adults’ questions. Adults need to create opportunities for children to talk, provide quality feedback on children’s language, and use a lot of new vocabulary repeatedly in meaningful contexts. Not every conversation a child has with caregivers can include all or even most of these facets of quality. Yet, because the vocabulary gap is so difficult to close, young children who are at-risk need the strongest early experiences that we can provide, grounded in decades of high-quality empirical research on this topic. Solutions for the word gap need to emphasize the content of conversations and the types of word learning, in the hope that our nation can ameliorate the “word gap” that is fueling the achievement gap (Wasik & Hindman, 2015).

Research shows that several principles (highlighted below) describe children’s vocabulary learning (Wasik & Hindman, 2015).

1. Children need repeated exposures to new words in order to learn them — sometimes as many as 200 exposures.
2. These exposures are most helpful if they include explicit definitions of words, perhaps including a picture or prop.
3. Children benefit when they can clearly connect a word’s meanings to their own background knowledge and experience. For example, a parent might say, “A zebra is similar to a horse, like the one we saw at the park last week, but it has a very special striped coat.”

4. Children learn more new words when they're presented in a meaningful context, rather than as isolated facts. For example, words could be introduced via a storybook reading and follow-up learning activities.
5. Children learn words best when they're exposed to a relatively *high density* of novel words relative to total words, likely because this introduces children to more novel terms and may draw their attention to words more generally. For example, in the Harvard Home-School Study children learned more new words when the adults around them used more complex vocabulary and inferential talk, such as predicting what might happen next in a story.
6. There is strong evidence that children benefit from the opportunity to use these words themselves and to receive specific feedback from adults on their understanding and pronunciation. This might include asking children to label things. For example, when encountering a zebra in a book, a parent might point to the picture of that animal and ask, "What's this?" or "Is this a zebra?" — and then praise accurate responses or gently correct misunderstandings. More challenging are open-ended questions in which adults prompt children to use a new word in the context of a multiword response to which there is more than one right answer. For example, the same teacher could ask, "Tell me how a zebra is different from other animals" or "How would stripes help keep a zebra safe in its habitat?" Children would have the chance to share ideas about zebras, and, in group settings, hear peers share their ideas and receive feedback on the accuracy and clarity of their responses.

Summary

There is evidence to suggest that a significant number of reading difficulties are preventable. For example, it is estimated that as many as 50% of children who are most at risk for reading failure can be brought to normal levels of performance following effective early reading instruction and interventions. The prevention of reading difficulties is motivated by the desire to prevent the negative outcomes associated with reading failure—such as grade retention, special education placement, high school dropout, unemployment, and so forth. Early and intensive interventions in reading are driven by the belief that the more prepared students are as they enter school and the more successful students are earlier in their educational careers, the greater the likelihood they will persist in school (Reschly, 2009). Their study introduced an idea that perhaps students affected by this gap could be negatively impacted in their academic performance, achievement, and in other ways.

In order to function in society productively, a solid foundation in language attainment is crucial as it impacts literacy development, directly relates to academic achievement, and ultimately impacts your livelihood as an adult (Bruche et al., 2020). With this in mind, an inadequate school experience could lead to a lack of preparation to attain the desired American Dream of a good job, a nice home, a family, and a decent income. In addition, lack of preparation could result in a less desirable outcome of potentially dropping out of school, unemployment, incarceration, etc.

The common thread that you will find in this research around impact is that students who are less prepared at the onset, will have less success during their academic career. This lack of academic success leads to a lack of preparation to be college and career ready. A lack of preparation to be college and career ready has several detrimental impacts on individuals and

society as a whole. This includes but is not limited to poor decision-making which starts with undesired results such as suspension from school, imprisonment, or worse.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Black male students in Grade 1 enter LDES school with a considerably lower vocabulary than their White male counterparts. This discrepancy translates into diminished classroom performance and student achievement, and, ultimately, college acceptance, and limited success in the job market (although these long-term potential consequences are not the focus of my study). The goal of my study is to utilize a research based instructional method that will increase vocabulary in Black male students in Grade 1 in order to decrease and ultimately close the word gap. In this chapter, I will discuss the process that I will use to target a group of Black male Grade 1 students, obtain parental consent to conduct the research, and explain and review the process of how I will support their vocabulary development to the students involved. The major components of this chapter will include a detailed description of my inquiry method as it relates to my study to include my inquiry partners, inquiry procedures, description of participants, use of data, the intervention I will use, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions.

Problem of Practice Guiding Questions

My study is guided by the following questions:

Research Question 1: How does targeting professional development aligned to students' vocabulary development increase the quality of a teacher's practice in teaching vocabulary?

This question is specifically aligned to pedagogy. Teacher preparedness and effectiveness requires an in dept understanding of the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) process. MTSS is designed to help schools identify struggling students early and intervene quickly. It focuses on the “whole child”. That means it supports academic growth but many other areas too. These include behavior, social and emotional needs, and absenteeism (not attending school). The tiers

of support are a huge part of MTSS. They get more intense from one level to the next. For example, a child getting small group interventions may need to “move up” to one-on-one help. MTSS isn’t the same thing as response to intervention (RTI) as it is more comprehensive but it may include the three tiers of RTI.

At the heart of the MTSS process is the Tier 1 component which is the universal, high quality classroom instruction that all students receive (Hall, 2018). MTSS is a framework with a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic and social-emotional behavior assessment and instructional resources to each and every student's needs.

One of my roles in Carolina County School System involves teacher support which includes designing and presenting professional development. Core learning is generally the focus when teacher professional development is designed, offered, and presented. This leaves a void in specific areas of need. My intervention intentionally addresses those voids.

Research Question 2: How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the Black male students in her classroom?

This question focuses on the intended short-term outcomes of the study. By the end of the study, it is my hope that the Black male students in Grade 1 will increase in vocabulary as compared to their White counterparts.

Both Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 are directly aligned to alleviating the word gap between Black and White students in Grade 1. My hope is that this study will have implications for all participants’ achievement subsequently, although all students are not the focus of my study, I believe that Black males will have greater benefit from the study. Research Question 1 highlights the effects of teacher professional development specifically geared towards

students' vocabulary development. Research Question 2 highlights the impact of my professional development intervention on the vocabulary development of Black male students in Grade 1 particularly in comparison to their White counterparts.

Although the majority of the research that I have included is centered around the word gap, the intent of this study is not specifically to close the word gap. Rather I want to first look at instructional practice, preparation, and implementation of an appropriate intervention that is aligned to vocabulary development. A decrease in the word gap would indicate that the intervention were successful. Therefore, the aim of this study is to show that appropriate professional development has a direct impact on teacher practice, which ultimately impacts student outcomes.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

The word gap between Black and White Grade 1 students in LDES is the specific focus for my study. In order to effectively engage in this study, I will begin with scheduling considerations. The intervention strategies to support this study will have to coincide and align with the regular implementation of English/Language Arts instruction. The current English/Language Arts (ELA) schedule is captured in Figure 7.

You will notice that the schedule is broken into two main components, the word recognition component and the language comprehension component. The word recognition component supports phonics instruction. It is during this portion of the schedule that students learn to read and understand words on a page. During the language comprehension portion of the lesson students make sense of the language that they read and the language that they learn. The read aloud portion of the schedule reinforces this process with teacher modeling the reading process.

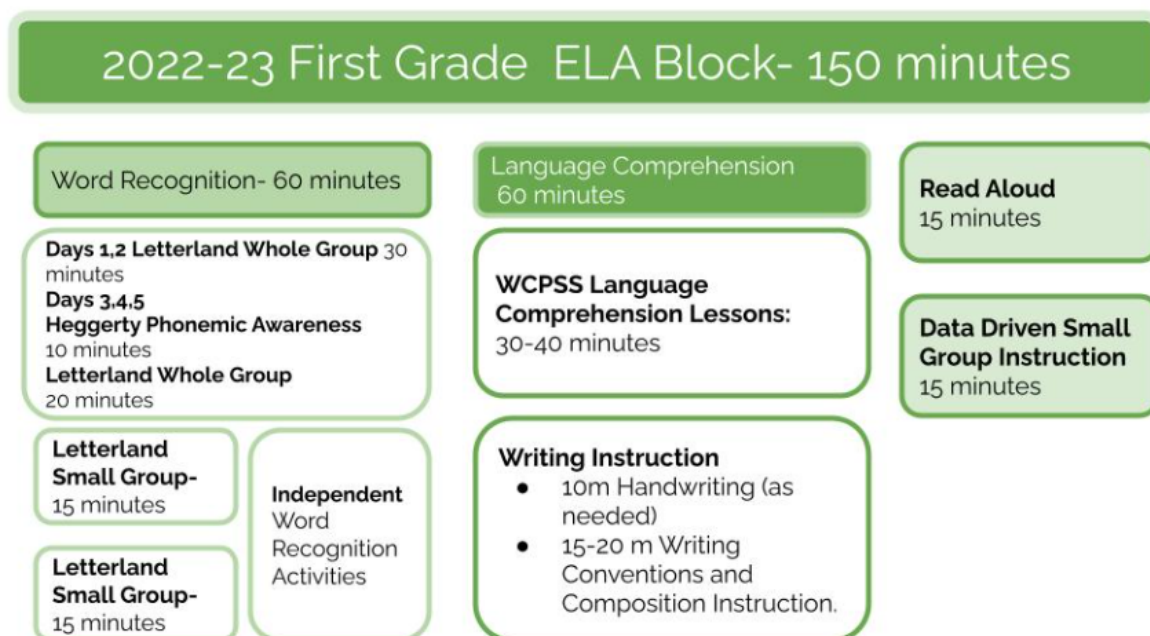


Figure 7. First grade ELA schedule.

Within the current ELA structure, there is also scheduled time for data-driven small group instruction. My intervention will utilize this dedicated time to group students according to topics of interest which they will indicate on an initial interest survey. Each group will be provided with a set of texts to build students' knowledge and vocabulary around a topic of interest with my anticipated end result being a vocabulary-focused culminating project. The professional development that teachers will receive will consist of a crosswalk of the currently implemented Grade 1 ELA curriculum and LETRS specifically LETRS Volume 2, Unit 5, The Mighty Word: Oral Language and Vocabulary). My rationale for this approach is to draw the connection between LETRS professional learning, our currently implemented curriculum, and the strategies that we will put in place to support vocabulary development. Within LETRS Unit 5 there is specific learning focused on direct vocabulary instruction as well as creating a language rich environment. This supports the group-based strategy we will use of building language around a topic.

The objectives for LETRS Volume 2 Unit 5 include:

1. Understand the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, oral language proficiency, and reading comprehension.
2. Review the evidence that early language stimulation is critical for vocabulary growth and literacy development.
3. Recognize that both breadth and depth of word knowledge are important for reading comprehension.
4. Understand how deep knowledge of a word is established through experience and instruction.
5. Assess students' vocabulary informally and formally.

6. Understand the uses as well as the limitations of dictionaries as vocabulary resources.
7. Select words based on the three-tier model for choosing vocabulary words.
8. Adapt vocabulary instruction for English Learners.
9. Use word lists as resources if appropriate.
10. Follow an effective routine for introducing target vocabulary to students.
11. Adapt vocabulary instruction for English Learners.
12. Use a variety of techniques to explore word relationships.
13. Teach new words in relation to other words.
14. Model and encourage the use of advanced vocabulary in the classroom.
15. Extend vocabulary practice after reading
16. Teach students to use context and word structure to reinforce word meanings and uses.

My project will be implemented during the third and fourth quarters of the school year for 2022-2023 school year. As mentioned earlier, my role in CCSS is Director of Prek-12 Literacy. Specifically, this role involves development and facilitation of professional learning, procurement of resources, and ongoing curriculum support. The natural process of providing professional learning to teachers and then follow up observations, walkthroughs, and support is very much in line with this study. The background of the teacher who will be implementing this professional development is that she is certified in elementary education. The professional development that they will implement for this project is in direct alignment with the LETRS professional learning that they will engage in. This will support and enhance this learning as well as their instructional knowledge. The specific areas of focus within the LETRS professional learning that I will target and align to this study are recognize that both breadth and depth of

word knowledge are important for reading comprehension, understand how deep knowledge of a word is established through experience and instruction, and assess students' vocabulary informally and formally. The crosswalk or parallel that I will draw between this learning and this study will involve building knowledge around a topic through the engagement of various texts on the same topic, formal and informal assessment of depth and breadth of vocabulary, and opportunities for independent reading through a variety of texts. Three main mechanisms for incidental word learning can further vocabulary growth beyond the instructional activities that teachers devise: listening to the language of others, being read to, and reading independently.

The measures that I will use to gauge the quality of the teachers' implementation of the strategies will be monthly walkthrough observations within the classroom of implementation for a 20-minute period using a checklist (see Appendix C) to evaluate the fidelity of the teachers' implementation of my intervention. The observation tool will include a crosswalk to comparatively measure the degree to which instructional practices are different from the literacy block structure of CCPS. This will attribute to the validity of measuring whether the quality of instruction has changed. Simply put, one of the indicators of teacher quality is preparation and pedagogy. If the teacher demonstrates that her practices have changed as a result of the professional learning that she has received, then quality is impacted. The checklist will assist in collecting formative data and will be based on the before mentioned criteria and areas of focus – (a) a variety of texts based on the same topic; (b) opportunities for formal and informal vocabulary assessment, and (c) independent reading opportunities. Additionally, I will look at summative data from the vocabulary portion of the mCLASS state administered end-of-year assessment. A description of the assessment probe is as follows:

The mCLASS vocabulary measure is administered on a computer or tablet and can be completed independently by the student. The measure is administered in kindergarten through grade 3. For grades K-1, each item and all answer options are spoken (by the computer) to the students who then select their answer choice. The vocabulary measure consists of three tasks, Two-Questions Vocabulary Measure, Fill in the Blank, and Basic Definition. The grade level determines which of the three Vocabulary tasks a student completes.

The Two-Questions Vocabulary Measure (TQVM) task determines the student's depth of knowledge of grade level tier 2 words. TQVM is administered to students in grades K-3 and consists of 14 or 20 items depending on grade. Students are asked two yes or no questions about each word.

The Fill in the Blank (FITB) task helps to determine students' basic understanding of grade-level words to complete a sentence. FITB is administered to students in grades 1-3 and consists of 8 or 10 items, depending on grade. Students are given a choice of four words to complete a sentence with a missing word.

The Basic Definition (BD) task determines whether the student has strategies for deducing the meaning of unknown words. BD is administered to students in grades 2-3 and consists of 15 items. Students read a sentence and are given a choice of four definitions for the underlined word in the sentence.

Finally, I will interview the teacher to determine if she feels as though her knowledge has changed as a result of professional development, if her quality of teacher practice has been increased, and if her knowledge of instructional approaches to teaching vocabulary has increased as well. Interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

My method of research will be a mixed methods case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in which I will identify a classroom, provide necessary professional development to the teacher, and monitor and gauge performance and achievement of students. Although the specific focus of the study will be Black males, the strategies employed will benefit all students.

Context of the Study

I will conduct my case study at LDES, a K-5 magnet school in a large urban district in southeastern United States. The magnet focus of LDES is global studies and Spanish immersion. After operating as a traditional school since its opening in 1998, LDES became a magnet school in the fall of 2020. The vision statement declared that the faculty at LDES would aim to develop and nurture global citizens as they fostered diverse relationships, built community, and inspired learners to discover how their strengths could positively impact the world. When I think about this vision, it is apparent to me that the teachers at LDES should have a desire to ensure that all students are on the path to being college and career ready upon completion of their Grade 5 school experience.

I selected LDES for my study based on overall student data which showed that students at LDES are performing at a much lower level of achievement than the district and the state. In Table 2 (referenced in Chapter 1, you will find that the overall academic proficiency of students at LDES on the North Carolina End of Grade test was 36% in 2021 while the CCSS's overall performance is 58% and the state's overall performance is 46%. The academic proficiency of Black students at LDES on the North Carolina End of Grade test for 2021 was 18%, while the corresponding figures at the district level for Black students was 34% and Black students at the state level was 29%. Comparatively, the academic proficiency of White students at LDES on the

North Carolina End of Grade test for 2021 was 65%, while White student performance overall for the district was 73%, and overall performance for White students across the state was 59%.

Potential Issue

Something to consider in my study is I am providing a whole class intervention, however the focus of my study is the existence of the word gap that exists between Black males and their counterparts. A question could be asked, why would I be suggesting that an intervention delivered to a whole class might have a differential impact on the achievement of the Black boys? I do acknowledge that vocabulary exposure is not new to their White counterparts and therefore believe that the Black male students will benefit more from this opportunity. As such, the study is still worth doing because of the limited exposure of the Black males.

Participant Selection

Student Participants

Student participants will consist of one Grade 1 classroom. All students within the classroom will participate and receive the intervention. Both male and female students are represented in the classroom as well as Black, White, and Hispanic ethnicities. Additionally, there is representation of special education and English as a second language students.

Inquiry Partners

The inquiry partners that I will engage in my study will be the individuals with whom I will work to strategically design and implement our vocabulary structure. My initial discussion with the principal will center around my intent for the research with the ultimate goal of providing professional development to increase knowledge of instructional approaches to ultimately impact vocabulary acquisition. The principal will help me identify a classroom to work with for my case study. Within LDES, I will involve several inquiry partners including the

primary person participating in the study, the classroom teacher, I will also, involve the instructional coach and literacy coach to share my case study plan to determine alignment with the structure of the instructional block. Specifically, the scope and sequence of the plan as well as the resources should align to the curriculum implementation in place. This will take planning with this team. The planning team will include myself, the principal, the literacy coach at the school, and the classroom teacher. Things to consider regarding the plan are what will the intervention be, what resources will need to be created or purchased for the teacher and the student, what will be our schedule to include implementation of the intervention as well as assessments, what will be the data points used to determine effectiveness of the intervention, and what will be the frequency and duration of the intervention. The classroom teacher will be the most critical inquiry partner. She will implement the plan of action with fidelity and meet regularly with me to monitor progress.

Intervention

My intervention will be directly aligned to the problem of practice guiding questions. Through targeted professional development, the identified teacher will increase her knowledge and ultimately lead to increase in vocabulary acquisition. Additional alignment will occur between current instructional practices and LETRS professional development. Students will have opportunities to engage in texts to build knowledge around topics of interest as well as increase vocabulary.

Phase 1

LDES is the school that was selected conduct my study. This choice involved working with the principal to identify a specific cooperating teacher after initial data analysis indicated a need for intervention at this school. Lucky Day has a high Black male population and has overall

consistently underperformed other schools in the district. In addition, the Black male students at Lucky Day Elementary School are performing below the district and the state levels on the state administered end of grade test. In an initial conversation with the principal, they selected a Grade 1 classroom to conduct this study. The teacher in this classroom is a veteran teacher with over sixteen years of experience. The initial phase of the study will involve myself, the classroom teacher, and the students. I will work in conjunction with the classroom teacher to develop an interest survey. The survey will be given to all students with the purpose of determining overall interest of students in order to guide selection of text sets to build vocabulary. The teacher or myself will read the survey to students in order to ensure understanding of the questions. In *An Educators Guide to Working with African American Students*, one of the strategies that Dr. Chance Lewis recommends for connecting with African American students is to investigate and find out what our students value (not assume) and find ways to incorporate their world into our classrooms (Lewis, 2016). In addition to the data that will be gathered from the survey, we will also review the beginning of year diagnostic assessment to gather baseline data for vocabulary performance.

Phase 2

Upon completion of the student survey, the information will be used to build text sets based on topics of interest. Students will be grouped according to texts of interest. The teacher will facilitate student engagement within groups. This may include completion of graphic organizers such as a word map or frayer model, a vocabulary log highlighting new vocabulary learned during reading, or a word wall. Students will read text sets independently, in pairs, and small groups to engage in collaborative conversations and work to build knowledge and vocabulary. This collaborative experience will help support varied levels of reading ability as

students will have the opportunity to listen to and engage in the text. Upon completion of text sets, students will produce a culminating activity (performance task). Students will apply and highlight key vocabulary within the performance task. The key inquiry partners involved in this process will be the literacy coach who will provide guidance in setting up the structure and schedule to insert this instructional practice and the teacher who will facilitate student engagement. Through this process I hope to answer Research Question 2, How does targeting instruction with specific strategies increase vocabulary in Black males and ultimately eliminate the word gap?

Phase 3

For this portion of the study, I will compare the baseline data collected with the BOY diagnostic assessment to the EOY diagnostic assessment. The state mandated diagnostic assessment is the mCLASS assessment. This assessment is administered to all K-3 students in the state. It is administered at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year, and the end of the year. The assessment measures at the first grade level are letter naming fluency, phonemic segmentation fluency, nonsense word fluency, word reading fluency, oral reading fluency, oral language, and vocabulary. I will look specifically to determine if there has been an impact on the vocabulary measure within the assessment. In Research Question 2, I asked “how does targeting instruction with specific strategies increase vocabulary in Black males and ultimately eliminate the word gap?” By comparing the vocabulary measure from middle of the year with end of the year from within the state administered vocabulary assessment, I will be able to answer this question. My hope is that my intervention will be accompanied by a positive impact on decreasing the gap between the vocabulary development of the two groups of students. This positive impact, should it emerge, will, in turn, have long term implications for me as an

educator responsible for literacy instruction although this is not the focus of my study. If I find a positive impact, next steps could involve conversations about expanding my intervention district-wide.

The trustworthiness and validity of this study is based on several factors. There are factors outside of my sphere of influence that could and possibly will impact student learning. These factors include the degree to which students are supported at home or their overall reading ability. I suggest that if I find that there is a positive impact on decreasing the vocabulary gap associated with my intervention, this study would be trustworthy and valid because the strategies used will be implemented with all students in the classroom. If we have positive results across the board then we know that these strategies are effective and in line with best practice. Ultimately, we would like to see greater gains for Black males in order to close the word gap.

Evidence of Effectiveness

In order to gauge effectiveness of the intervention we will look at two specific standards. The first thing will be formal observations of classroom implementation. The expectation will be that the intervention is implemented with fidelity as intended. The second standard that will be used to gauge effectiveness is data. Prior to implementation we will assess the current state of vocabulary proficiency based on beginning of the year assessment. At the end of implementation we will use the same measure to determine growth in this area.

Walkthrough Observations

Walkthrough observations will be conducted using an instrument specifically designed to align to expectations of the intervention. As mentioned earlier, the criteria used will include, (a) a variety of texts based on the same topic; (b) opportunities for formal and informal vocabulary assessment, and (c) independent reading opportunities.

Testing Instrument

The testing instrument that will be used to determine effectiveness will be the North Carolina K-3 assessment instrument. This assessment is given to all K-3 students at the beginning of the year, middle of the year, and end of year benchmark periods.

Ethical Considerations

One ethical consideration would be the existence of biases regarding the beliefs on student achievement. Specifically, do all participants (the forementioned team) believe that providing professional development to increase knowledge of instructional approaches will increase vocabulary acquisition and if these biases do exist how might we address and eliminate them. Additionally, as a Black male I have a vested interest in seeing this project through to a successful outcome and will therefore work with the inquiry partners to gain their perspective on how I am interpreting and analyzing the data. Finally, the ethical considerations for this study will be reflected in my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This approval will document my plans to ensure that all individuals involved are protected. The most important consideration is whether someone can be hurt in this case study. Based on implementation plans there is no potential for harm or danger to any of the individuals involved in the case study.

Providing Student Information

Individual student information will be kept confidential during the study. When necessary, if reporting student information this will be done so holistically or if there are instances where a specific student needs to be highlighted, I will use a pseudonym.

Limitations and Assumptions

When considering limitations, this study has a small sample of students included as it is being conducted at one school with one class therefore the measure impacted is small. My main

assumption is that the teacher will be open to changing their instructional practices to incorporate the strategies I have designed. I also assume that the teacher will incorporate these changes to increase the likelihood that all of their students—and especially their Black male students—will increase their vocabulary.

Role of Scholarly Practitioner

My current role in the district is Director of PreK-12 Literacy. Part of my responsibility is to support, evaluate, and monitor curriculum implementation for literacy instruction. This entails procurement and distribution of resources based on research, development and facilitation of aligned professional development based on best practices and adult learning styles, and goal setting and data analysis. Similarly, my role in this study will be to provide resources and professional development based on best practices and research, monitor implementation, and analyze data. Data analysis will provide information that will guide future decision making and professional growth.

Summary

The Black male students at LDES have consistently underperformed the district and state on benchmark assessments. Guided by my conceptual framework, my goal and intended outcome of my work at LDES is to provide a teacher with adequate resources to support vocabulary growth on the benchmark assessment. A potential timeline for the identification of strategies and implementation would be a single school year with initial roll-out occurring in the fall. My strategic plan would begin in the preceding July with the establishment of a list of who will receive what materials and purchasing those materials. This strategic plan would then lay out general action steps regarding the professional development of teachers, the holding of a parent meeting, and the distribution of instructional materials needed. Throughout

implementation there would be progress monitoring to determine changes in performance based on the NC diagnostic assessment benchmarks. At the conclusion of the school year, the implementation team would discuss adjustments needing to be made based on feedback, grows, and glows of the program.

Once a general evaluation has been done, and I have received teacher input from the cooperating teacher and the team, we would make necessary adjustments to the plan for implementation next school year. This plan might involve ordering of additional materials as well as teacher and parent training. This training and receipt of materials would take place prior to the end of the school year in preparation to effectively begin the next school year.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of my research was to determine how providing targeted professional development to teachers would impact vocabulary development in first grade students, specifically black male students. More specifically, I evaluated the strategies the teacher learned during the LETRS professional learning sessions as well as specific professional learning on black males and how these learning opportunities and the strategies learned would have a direct impact on student achievement. The professional learning opportunities began in January of 2021 have been ongoing and will conclude in the Spring of 2024. The entirety of the professional learning sessions is beyond the scope of this dissertation project. This project focuses on the professional learning and student impact through Fall 2023. The teachers' engagement involved both independent learning through online modules as well as face to face sessions with a certified facilitator and opportunities to implement the new learning within their classrooms. LETRS training was created and implemented to support the science of reading, providing teachers with an in depth understanding of the process that ensues when a student is learning to read. This training was required by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This learning coupled with effective teaching strategies allows for a successful trajectory with regards to literacy and student achievement. Additionally, the selected teacher for this study engaged in a session of The Word Gap training which provided research on best practices for black male students as well as research on the current state of black male students as related to their counterparts. The focus on "words" or more specifically vocabulary is based on research which speaks to the direct correlation between vocabulary attainment and overall student achievement. My hope in this engagement is for students to have an experience that supports their individual needs for learning by providing a combination regiment of specifically designed strategies based

on a formula that is LETRS training + The Word Gap training = effective teaching strategies for ALL.

Research Questions

My research will be guided by the following questions:

- Research Question 1: How does targeting professional development aligned to students' vocabulary development increase the quality of a teachers practice in teaching vocabulary?
- Research Question 2: How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the black male students in her classroom?

Demographics and Background

The teacher for this study was selected to participate based on her level of experience within the classroom as well as her overall broad range of experiences in different U.S. states in different positions. This wealth of knowledge and experience supports the needs of her students and this study. With 12 years of teaching experience, prior to becoming a classroom teacher, she initially served in the role of social worker. My belief was this experience makes her more sensitive to the needs of low performing students in that typically the role of a social worker is to support and fill in gaps to ensure equity. During her time as a social worker, she created an affordable housing project to work within the community of Philadelphia to support families in becoming homeowners. Additionally, this teacher served in the role of afterschool care director, a role which she served in for free. Each of these experiences of service led her to pursue her career as classroom teacher where she initially served in inner city Philadelphia for 4 years prior to migrating to North Carolina where she currently serves as first grade teacher at LDES. The

principal of LDES is a black female with 4 years of experience serving in this role and the teacher participating in the study is a white female with 12 years of teaching experience.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study began during the spring semester of the 2022-2023 school year. I began with a meeting with the school Principal and selected a teacher to share the context of my study including the professional learning involved which has several facets such as online modules, synchronous sessions, and individual self-paced learning. This learning opportunity is inclusive of several adult learning styles. Additionally in my initial meeting I communicated the overall intent of the study being to leverage this professional learning to impact student achievement of ALL students with a specific focus on black male students. Further, in this conversation I drew the connections between understanding the connections between strategies that impact overall vocabulary attainment as well as strategies that are effective for black male students will strategically lead to increased student achievement for ALL.

Participant Recruitment

I had extensive conversations with the principal at LDES prior to beginning the study in order to ensure that selection of the teacher for this case study had a willingness to participate, a diverse classroom population, and teaching experience that lends itself to a dedication to students that ensures equity and access for all students. With that we began with selection of a teacher based on that criterion. This was followed by a student interest survey to determine selection and purchase of texts, and then comprehensive implementation of the word gap study. Based on this criterion we selected this participant and classroom for the study. Involvement included the teacher, administrator, and the classroom students.

Professional Development Series

The objective with the professional learning opportunity for this study was to align The Word Gap learning with the LETRS (Learning Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) learning that teachers are currently engaging in the district. This alignment involved intentionality in design to ensure that best practices for ensuring success for black males was aligned to the research surrounding The Science of Reading which is the foundation of the LETRS training. As Director of Literacy in the district, one of my responsibilities is to facilitate, manage, and coordinate the delivery of LETRS training. Additionally, prior to development of the district plan for implementation, I myself participated in LETRS training and completed the necessary steps to become a certified LETRS facilitator.

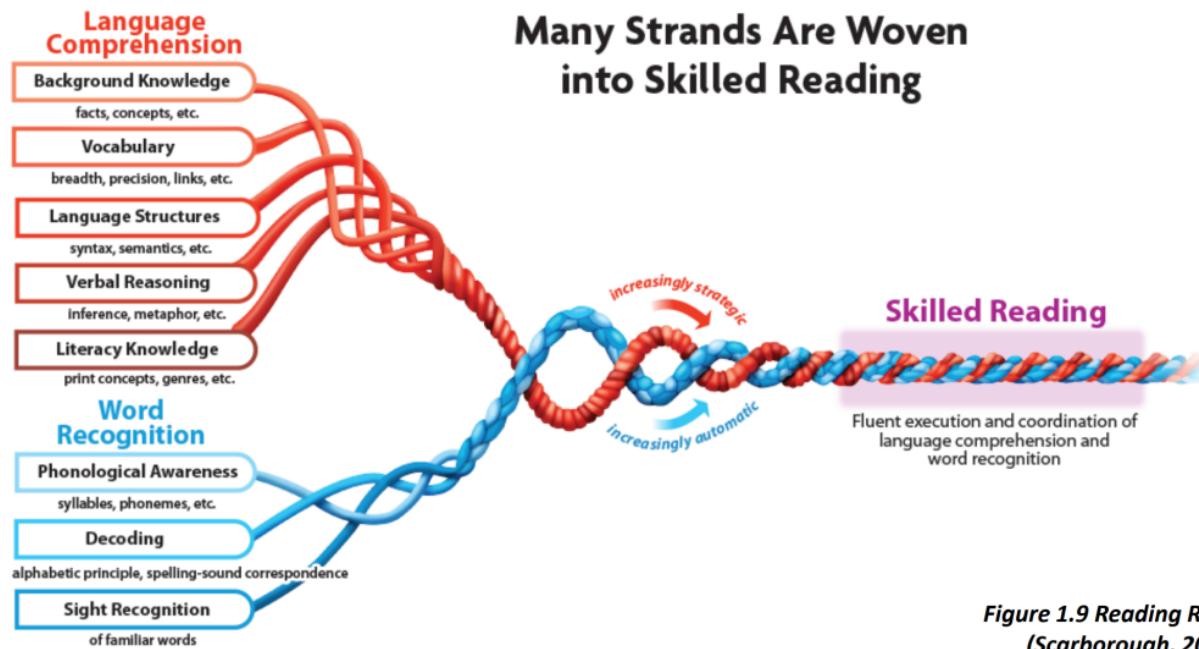
The LETRS training series consists of eight units of study, units 1-4 in volume 1 and units 5-8 in volume 2 centered around The Science of Reading. The Science of Reading is a body of research that investigates how people learn to read. As a result of decades of research on literacy instruction (by cognitive scientists, educational researchers, psychologists, and others), we now know how the brain learns to read and instructional methods that support this process. (Petscher et al., in press). LETRS provides teachers with the research, depth of knowledge and tools to teach language and literacy skills to every student. The knowledge gained from LETRS professional learning for teachers will allow them to make key decisions as students respond to the word recognition and language comprehension components of reading instruction. Combining this knowledge with research and best practices contained within The Word Gap training will allow for creation of an intentional and target plan focused at increased vocabulary and improved overall reading achievement. The Word Gap professional learning consists of a review of data and literature regarding black male achievement, a connection to best practices for

vocabulary instruction in LETRS, and an opportunity for personal reflection on past and current instructional practices for supporting reading instruction.

Session One: January 2022: The Challenge of Learning to Read?

Session one, titled The Challenge of Learning to Read, is the first unit in Volume 1 of LETRS training. Session one is focused on the problems that are faced when children are learning to read as well as what occurs in the brain as a child is learning to read. Participants begin by exploring sources for information about science-based instruction and the most common and persistent problems faced when learning to read. They then have the opportunity to look at the connection between language and literacy. While learning about this connection they develop an understanding of the dependency that reading and writing have on language abilities. This shifts them to learning about what the brain does when it reads where they find out that eye-movement research confirms that fluent readers process every letter of printed words and match them to speech sounds. Also, each major processing system in the reading brain has a job. Participants will be able to identify them. Once participants understand the brains functioning when reading they will learn what skills support proficient reading. This includes understanding the subskills of word recognition and language comprehension identified in Scarborough's Reading Rope (see Figure 8) as well as how the reading brain achieves automaticity. Scarborough's rope asserts that both language comprehension and word recognition are necessary for skilled reading or for "fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text. Participants learn about the simple view of reading (see Figure 9), its implications for the reading process, and the concept that reading comprehension is the product of printed word recognition and language comprehension. The Simple View of Reading is a theory that attempts to define the skills that contribute to early reading comprehension. According to the original

theory, an individual's reading comprehension is the product of her decoding skill and language comprehension After learning what skills support reading development, participants will explore how children learn to read and spell which includes recognizing characteristics of the developmental phases of early word recognition and what they indicate about students' instructional needs. It is at this point in the session, that participants begin to explore the major



**Figure 1.9 Reading Rope
(Scarborough, 2001)**

Figure 8. Scarborough's Reading Rope.

The Simple View of Reading



Figure 9. The simple view of reading.

types of reading difficulties. Once there is a clear understanding of the major types of reading difficulties, participants learn how to use assessments to screen and diagnose students in an effort to identify students at risk, provide effective instruction, and differentiate appropriately. Session one is centered around five compelling questions: (1) Approximately how many students in your school, district, or state are viewed as poor readers at the end of grade 3?, (2) By what criteria are those students identified (e.g., state end-of-grade tests, benchmarks on screening measures, NAEP scores)?, (3) Are your local school statistics better than, the same as, or worse than state averages?, (4) Are you satisfied with your class's achievement in reading, spelling, writing, and/or language?, and (5) What improvements in student achievement do you think are possible if conditions of schooling are optimal?

Session Two: August 2022: The Speech Sounds of English

Session two, titled “The Speech Sounds of English,” is the second unit in volume 1 of LETRS training. Session two is focused on phonological and phoneme awareness and the roles that they play in learning to read. Initially participants explore how phonology is related to reading and spelling by learning about the phonological processing system and the role that it plays in the process. Further, participants learn how phonological skills develop through early, basic, and advanced phonemic awareness activities. After exploring the what and the how of phonemic awareness, participants explore why phonemic awareness is important. This is done through exploration of research and summarizing the evidence that phonemic awareness is a critical component of effective instruction. Participants then dive deeper in to learning the consonant and vowel Phonemes of English enabling them to learn about the organization of the consonant and vowel charts, articulate each phoneme, and identify and produce vowel phonemes of English. Dialect is also introduced in this session in learning about how to recognize and

respond constructively to errors of English Learners and dialect speakers. Additionally, learning about how allophonic variation in speech affects students' spelling. After this initial foundational learning takes place the transference theory to action takes place in that participants explore how phonological skills should be taught in the classroom. There is a look at which students benefit from phonological and phonemic awareness instruction as well as appropriate multisensory phonemic awareness activities including blending, segmentation, substitution, deletion, and reversal. As assessment should always be considered part of instruction, participants also learn about what phonological skills should be assessed by not only looking at screening of students for early, basic, and advanced phonological skills but also considering how to use test results to identify appropriate goals for instruction. Session two focuses on three guiding questions: (1) What does phonemic awareness have to do with word reading, spelling, and vocabulary development?, (2) How many phonemes are there in the English Language? Has anyone ever taught you these phonemes? Can you name them from memory?, and (3) What roles do phonemic awareness and phonological awareness have in your classroom instruction?

Session Three: November 2022: Teaching Beginning, Phonics, Word Recognition, and Spelling

Session three, titled “Teaching Beginning, Phonics, Word Recognition, and Spelling”, is the third unit in volume 1 of LETRS training. Session three is focused on the key components involved in decoding and word recognition. Initially participants explore the concept of code-emphasis and the role that it plays in learning to read. This is done through introduction of the reading rope and what role each strand of the reading rope plays in word recognition, learning about phonics and its role in reading instruction, and comparing code-emphasis instruction with meaning-emphasis instruction. Additionally, participants explore the predictability of English

orthography by looking at the phoneme-grapheme correspondence system of English, classifying basic phonic elements such as digraphs, blends, vowel teams, and developing a general understanding of some basic patterns of position-based spelling in English. There is discussion of Ehri's Phases and how to differentiate instructional goals with reference to Ehri's Phases. After development of general foundational knowledge participants engage in the process of how instruction should begin; (1) Teach letter names and letter formation, (2) Use appropriate key words for sound-symbol associations, (3) Teach new correspondence explicitly, (4) Use sound-blending routines. After engaging in the instructional process, participants look at what kind of practice is necessary for students to further develop these skills. Practice could include use of a variety of word practice routines and inclusion of word meaning in practice routines. Spelling is also a key component of session 3. Specifically, consideration of how spelling can be taught using dictation, how reading and spelling are related, employment of a routine for word, phrase, and sentence dictation, and how to teach high-frequency words using multisensory techniques. One important resource in this process is the use of decodable text. In this session, participants learn when it is important and appropriate to use decodable text and how to structure text reading for student success. Additionally, when considering this entire process for overall student success, obtaining and using data to evaluate instruction as well as selecting and evaluating instructional materials that support systemic, explicit, code-based instruction are key to the process as well. Session three focuses on two key questions: (1) What methods or activities do you currently use to teach students how to decode words? How do these reflect your own understanding of decoding skills? and (2) In what ways do you already include phonics in your daily instruction?

Session Four: January 2023: Advanced Decoding, Spelling, and Word Recognition

Session four, titled “Advanced Decoding, Spelling, and Word Recognition”, is the fourth unit in volume 1 of LETRS training. Session four is focused on word origin and advanced word study. This session begins with an introduction to the term advanced word study and an understanding of the value and importance of the concept. Through this, participants learn to identify five ways to explain any word and recognize historical influences on English orthography. Next is the exploration of position-based spelling correspondences and learning about the technique of phoneme-grapheme mapping. Participants then dive into why and how syllable types should be taught with an understanding of the reasons for teaching syllable patterns, identifying and manipulating six syllable types, and to teach multisyllabic word-reading strategies to students. Morphology is the next phase in the session where participants learn the historical origins and types of English morphemes and examine the suffix addition rules. Additionally, there are rules, structure, and best practices provided for how spelling should be taught and assessed through diagnostic spelling screeners. Along with spelling there is fluency and the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Once these concepts are learned the importance of intentionally analyzing data is a critical component of the process that is explored. Specifically, the interpretation of phonological, phonics, spelling, and fluency data. With that, an alignment of practices and scientific evidence is essential as is the concept of balance in instruction. Session four focuses on four key questions: (1) In your school, is there a vertically aligned program of word study (word recognition and word analysis)?; (2) Is spelling taught as a distinct subject? If so, how is it taught?; (3) Do the outcome data of your class or school suggest that the word study component can be strengthened? If so, in which ways?; (4) Do you feel confident that you can explain why words are spelled the way they are? Why or why not?

Session Five: February 2023: The Mighty Word: Oral Language and Vocabulary

Session five, titled “The Mighty Word: Oral Language and Vocabulary”, is the fifth unit in LETRS professional development and the first unit in volume 2 of LETRS. Session five is focused on the importance of vocabulary, specifically understanding the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, oral language proficiency, and reading comprehension. To achieve this, there is a review of evidence that early language stimulation is critical for vocabulary growth and literacy development. The session dives into what does knowing a word involve by recognizing that both breadth and depth of word knowledge are important for reading comprehension, understanding how deep knowledge of a word is established through experience and instruction, and an assessment of students’ vocabulary informally and formally. Participants learn what words should be taught directly by understanding the uses as well as limitations of dictionaries as vocabulary resources, selecting words based on the three-tier model for choosing vocabulary words, adapting vocabulary instruction for English Learners, and the use of word lists as resources if appropriate. They also learn how new words should be introduced by following an effective routine for introducing target vocabulary to students. Additionally, participants engage in what kinds of practice are effective such as the use of a variety of techniques to explore word relationships and teaching new words in relation to other words. Finally, participants learn how a language-rich classroom is created by modeling and encouraging the use of advanced vocabulary in the classroom, extending vocabulary practice after reading, and teaching students to use context and word structure to reinforce word meanings and uses. Unit 5 focuses on three key questions (1) What methods or activities do you currently use to teach students new vocabulary? How do these reflect your own understanding of the relationship between oral language and vocabulary

instruction? (2) How do you work word relationships into your vocabulary instruction? (3) In what ways do you create a language-rich classroom?

Session Six: March 2023: The Word Gap Professional Development

Session six, titled “The Word Gap Professional Development” is the final phase of professional learning for this study. This session focuses on a review of data and literature regarding black male achievement, a review of best practices for vocabulary instruction in LETRS, and a review of the plan of implementation for the case study. Also outlined in this session is the overall intended outcomes for the study which are to increase study achievement for black male students, increase student achievement for all first-grade students, and to implement strategies and resources to support the teachers in facilitation of vocabulary instruction. The session begins with “The What and the Why”, highlighting the problem of practice, issues with the current state, and the need for this study. Participants are able to examine their own bias, the value in building relationships and emotional intelligence with black male students, and ways to break the cycle that is the word gap. With that, participants examine their beliefs about educating black males, best practices for doing so, and how might what they have learned in LETRS align with some of these best practices. This leads to discussion of the procedure for the study which includes three phases. Phase one involves a student survey to determine interest for purchasing of text, a review of baseline data from the mCLASS assessment, and the purchasing of text. Phase two involves distribution of text based on student interest building of text sets to organize around topics, and student engagement / classroom implementation. During student engagement / classroom implementation students will engage in independent, small group, and partner reading based on topics of interest. Students will record vocabulary words that are new in their journals and work to define them using context and

dictionaries. Students will also create a culminating word wall for display of their newly learned vocabulary. Phase three involves comparison of baseline data and EOY data as well as the teacher interview. Additional sessions continue through Spring 2024 and outside the scope of this dissertation.

Impact of COVID

In March of 2020, our world was shaken with an unimaginable event which has had long-lasting effects that we are still realizing to this day. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic impacted every aspect of our lives. For the purpose of this research, I will discuss the effects that it had on our education system. Teaching and learning look very different in 2023 as a result of COVID-19. The most notable difference includes instructional strategies and learning practices. There are two major sources that determine exemplary practices: Learning strategies that are research-based and Learning practices that are evidence based (Learning Focused, 2019).

Research-based strategies are those strategies that research proves will help raise student learning and achievement significantly. Individuals, research centers across the country, as well as the US Department of Education have vetted these strategies and compiled the list below (see Table 8). Please note that vocabulary instruction is number four with an effect size of .85.

Evidence-based learning practices are practices that are significantly increasing achievement based on multiple school evaluations as practices commonly found in exemplary schools and are much less evident in typical schools. Although they are not included on the list of research-based strategies, each practice consists of one or more research-based strategies, which is why they are so effective and when implemented by teachers, there are significant achievement gains.

Table 8

The Top Research-based Learning Strategies

Strategy	Effect Size
Higher Order Thinking	1.61
Distributed Summarizing	1.00
Numbered Heads Collaborative Pairs	.92
Vocabulary Instruction	.85
Reading Comprehension Instruction	.82
Writing to Raise Achievement	.82
Acceleration Intervention Focus	.80
Social learning Focus	.80
Activate Thinking	.75
Learning Goals	.75
Feedback	.75
Advanced Organizers/ Previewing	.73
Distributed Learning	.71
Formative Assessments	.68
Graphic Organizers/ Concept Maps	.65
Direct Instruction	.60
Scaffolding	.50

The impact that COVID-19 has had on these strategies and practices is a direct result of virtual teaching and learning. Quite simply, without face-to-face access to students, teachers scrambled to elicit compliance and completion of assignments. In our district, students were online with an instructor for an average of 30 minutes at a time. This leaves minimal opportunities for implementation of learning strategies that are research-based or learning practices that are evidence based. For example, in a virtual setting, opportunities for writing are eliminated. Additionally, numbered heads and the use of protocols to engage in distributive summarizing is also problematic. Also, the research-based strategies used in this study to provide vocabulary instruction require opportunities for collaboration and engagement with texts based on interest surveys. While this is not impossible to engage in a virtual setting, it can be challenging. When comparing state level achievement pre and post COVID (see Figure 10), you will find that students in North Carolina have not made it back to pre-COVID levels of proficiency. Additionally, in Wake County, you will find that with the exception of grade four, overall students have not made it back to pre-COVID levels of proficiency (see Figure 11).

Case Study

This study involved the use of various materials to ensure effective implementation and support for both the cooperating teacher and all participating students. At the onset of the study, students were given an interest survey (see Appendix E). The administration of the interest survey served two purposes, to determine topics of interest in order to create collaborative learning groups and to assemble book sets for students to engage in reading based on similar topics of interest. Upon receiving the results of the interest survey (see Figure 12), I compiled the responses and affinity grouped the responses based on similar patterns of interest. The results of the affinity groups were: (1) Sports/Bikes/Active Games, (2) Outdoors/Nature, (3)

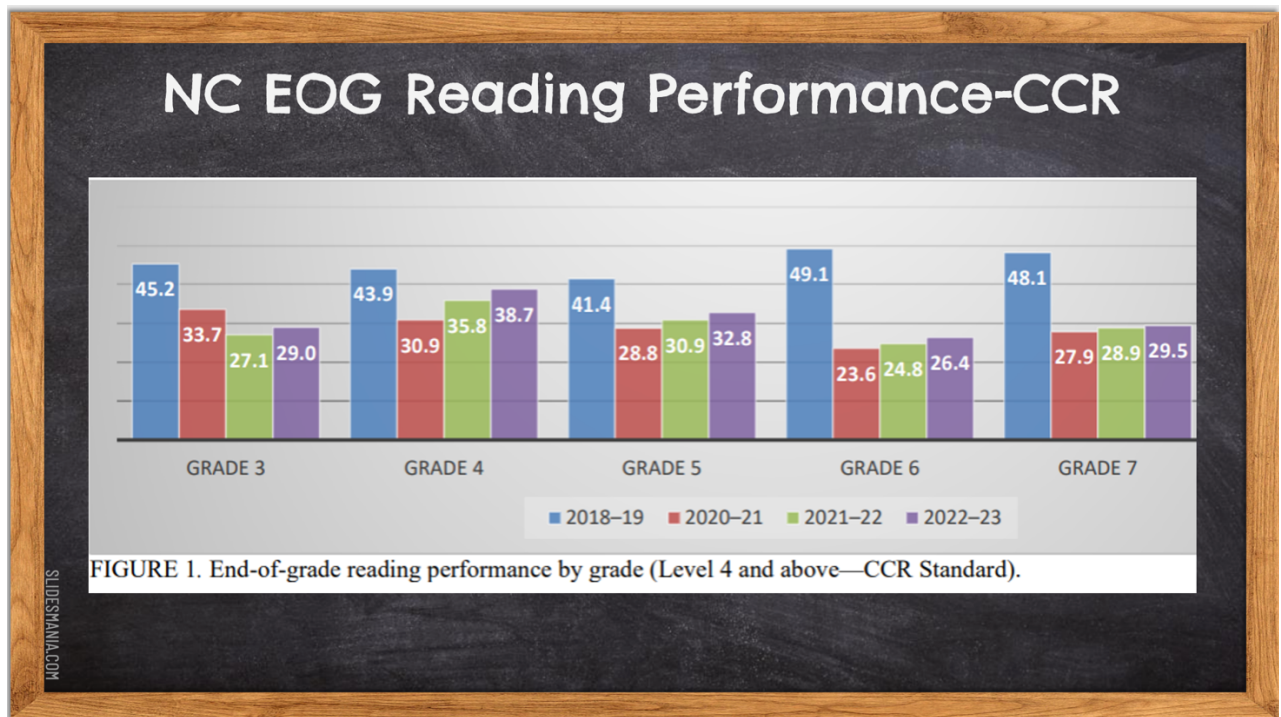
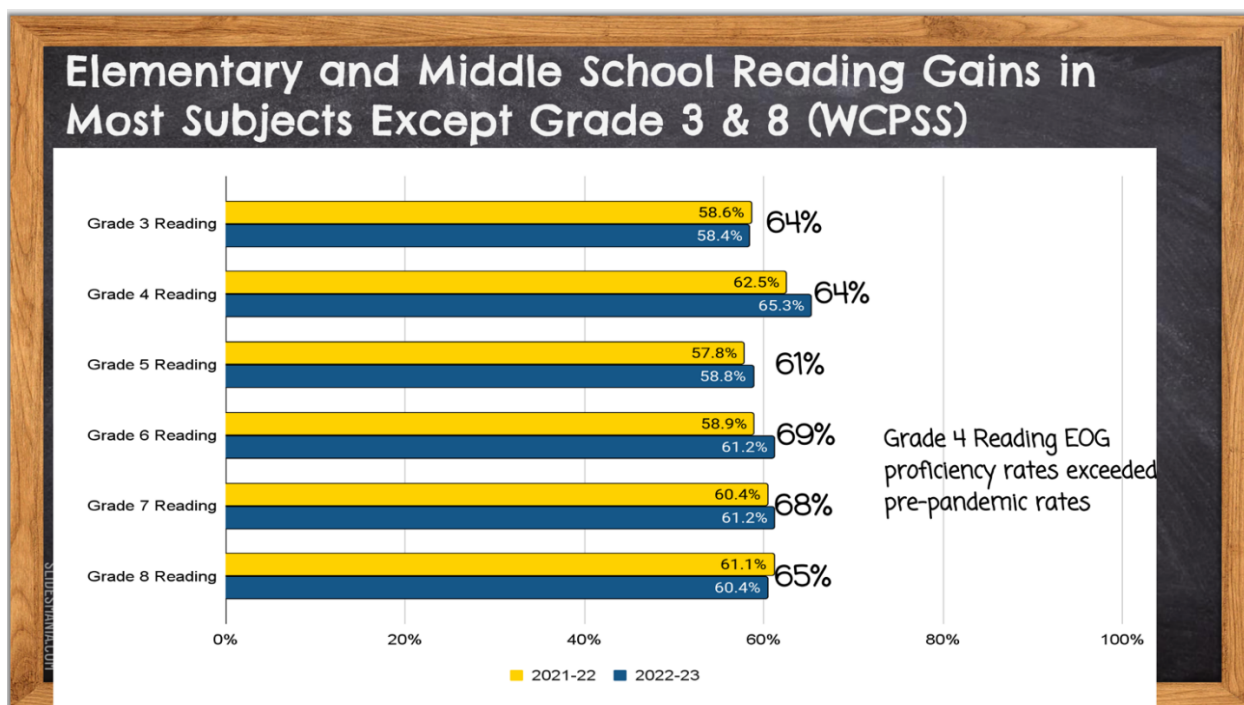


Figure 10. NC EOG Reading Performance-CCR 2018 – 2023.



Note. Numbers outside of the bar graph indicate pre COVID level of proficiency.

Figure 11. Wake County EOG Reading Performance 2021 – 2023.

Student Interest Survey Results	
Question 1	Yes=16 No=1
Question 2	Yes=13 No=4
Question 3	Yes 10 No=7
Question 4	Funny=12 Happy=13 Sad=6
Question 5	Real=11 Make Believe=12
Question 6	(Book Titles) = Pete the Cat, Gotham City, Piggy and Elephant, Whale vs. Giant, Percy Jackson, China Books, Big Bad Wolf, The Wolf and the Unicorn, One more Hug, Happy Farm, Cat in the Hat, The Catapillar.
Question 7	(T.V. Show) = FGTV, Wednesday(2), Mickey Mouse, Octonats, Lucky Box, YouTube, Luka, Spongebob, Nickmaus, Henry, George the Monkey, Netflix, Barbie
Question 8	(Game) = Fortnite(3), Minecraft(4), Ruby, Rumbring Raceer, Roblox(3), Tag, Happy, Hot Potato, Tic Tac Toe, Princers, Robots
Question 9	(Toy) = Pokeman(2), Cars(3), Truck, Sperm Whale, Dinosaurs, Bumblebee, Stuffed Animal, Legos, Barbie(3), Doll, Fish
Question 10	(Place) = Skyzone(2), Gamestop, Walmart(3), Defy Gravity, Indoor Pool, Target, Atlanta, WaterPark, Cocos House, Frankies, The Park (2), Puzza Hut
Question 1	(Page 2) = Read(3), MineCraft(3), Chores, Play, Draw, Sleep, Get Food, Toys, Play(3), TV, Barbie
Question 2	(Page 2) = Play tag(3), Soccer, Play Manhunt, Play(4), Fishing, Trampoline, Cat, Do Make Up, Hop Scotch, Play in the park
Question 3	(Page 2) = Soccer(2), Bike Ride, Football, Running, Drawing, Wash Dishes, Help Mom, Gym
Question 4	(Page 2) = Cousin, President, Steph Curry, My Uncle, Mom, Jwon, Mr. Beast, Tom Holland(2), Sonic, My Aunt, Bob, Donald Trump, Ariana Grande, God
Question 5	(Page 2) = Buy a car(2), Buy Pokeman, Buy a House, Give to mom and dad, Give to the homeless, Buy a Mansion(3), Give to the poor(4), Pixie Pals, Give to my brother
Question 6	(Page 2) = Policeman, Mechanic, Fireman, Truck Driver, Teacher Cardiologist, Fish, Scientist, Doctor, Ninga Teacher, Veterinarian, Kids Doctor, Singer in Church

Figure 12. Student interest survey results.

Building/Construction, and (4) Visual Arts/Performing. Based on these category topics students were grouped according to their interest and book sets were assembled accordingly.

Prior to engaging students, the teacher participated in LETRS training as well as The Word Gap professional development as described earlier in this chapter. Additionally, parents were informed that their students would be participating in the study through distribution of a consent form (see Appendix B). After teacher training, solicitation of student interest, parental permission, and assembling of book sets students were able to begin engaging in learning about the processes that they would engage in to increase vocabulary acquisition. This learning involved a launch. The essential purpose of a launch is for a teacher to introduce a new task to students, ensure students are clear on the expectations, and that they have access to materials. This process is critical as it sets the stage for a successful and engaging learning experience, creates a more level playing field for students as they engage in new learning, and serves as a motivator as students become invested in the new learning. The launch involved teacher guided whole group sessions followed by one-on-one conversations to serve as a scaffold for clarity of understanding. Students were informed of their groups based on their interest survey as well as the process that they would engage in to support vocabulary development.

Each day students were allotted time to select a book from their book set for reading enjoyment and acknowledgement of new vocabulary. During reading, students highlighted new vocabulary and wrote these terms in their vocabulary journal. Additionally, students looked for definitions of the words either electronically or in a hand-held dictionary. Finally, students were given an opportunity for an extension activity to complete which involved drawing a picture accompanied by use of the word in a sentence.

Student Achievement Data Analysis

In managing the data collection for this study, I compared the beginning of the year (BOY) composite data for mCLASS diagnostic assessment with the middle of the year (MOY) and end of the year (EOY) composite data. Specifically, I compared two measures, (1) the overall composite score which is comprised of nine measures:

1. Letter Names (LNF)
2. Phonemic Awareness (PSF)
3. Letter Sounds (NWF – CLS)
4. Decoding (NWF – WRC)
5. Word Reading (WRF)
6. Reading Accuracy (ORF – Accu)
7. Reading Fluency (ORF)
8. Oral Language (OL)
9. Vocabulary (VOCAB)

and (2) the individual vocabulary measure which is the focus of our study. The rationale for this process was to determine impact of implemented strategies as related to Research Question 2:

How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the black male students in her classroom?

Composite Data

As indicated in Table 9, the goal for the first grade mCLASS composite score at BOY is 330, at MOY is 389, and at EOY is 441. There are 18 students in the class of study. Out of the 18 students, 10 students were well below benchmark at BOY, 2 students were below benchmark at

Table 9

mCLASS Composite Results

Test Window	Goal	Total Number of Students	Number of Students at Benchmark	Number of Black Male Students at Benchmark
BOY	330	18	6	0
EOY	441	18	10	2

BOY, 5 students were at benchmark at BOY, and 1 student was above benchmark at BOY. There are two black males in the classroom. Both black male students were below benchmark at BOY.

In comparison, at EOY, out of the 18 students, 5 students were well below benchmark at EOY, 3 students were below benchmark at EOY, 9 students were at benchmark at EOY, and 1 student was above benchmark at EOY. Both black male students were at benchmark at EOY. Students were below benchmark at EOY. Moreover, 8 students increased on the vocabulary measure at EOY compared to BOY while 8 students decreased, and 2 students remained the same.

Vocabulary Data

As indicated in Table 10, the goal for the first grade mCLASS vocabulary measure at BOY is 18, at MOY is 19, and at EOY is 19. At BOY 7 students are well below benchmark, 4 students are below benchmark, 7 students are at benchmark, and 0 students are above benchmark. Both black male students were at benchmark at BOY.

In comparison, at EOY, 7 students are well below benchmark, 5 students are below benchmark, 6 students are at benchmark, and 0 students are above benchmark. Both black male same. Additionally, 6 students met the vocabulary goal at EOY while 7 students met the vocabulary goal at BOY. Finally, there was a total of a 21 point increase collectively throughout the class on the vocabulary measure and a 21 point decrease collectively throughout the class on the vocabulary measure (this accounts for the number of points each individual student increased or decreased on the vocabulary measure from BOY to EOY).

Summary

This research study was directed by two research questions focused on the impact of professional learning on the quality of a teachers practice in teaching vocabulary and student

Table 10

mCLASS Vocabulary Results

Test Window	Goal	Total Number Of Students	Total Number Of Students at Benchmark	Number Of Black Male Students At Benchmark
BOY	18	18	7	2
EOY	19	18	6	0
				Collective increase in points = 21 (eight students)
				Collective decrease in points = 21 (eight students)

achievement in vocabulary acquisition. My analysis produced findings aligned to these questions. Regarding Research Question 1, my analysis suggested that there is a relationship between appropriately aligned research based professional development based on responses to the teacher interview questions. Specifically, Regarding Research Question 2, although there was reasonable growth in overall student achievement from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, my analysis did not affirm my proposed hypothesis that targeted professional development would equip the teacher with the strategies to increase vocabulary in black male students in her classroom. In the following chapter, I will delve deeper into findings as related to the study based on both qualitative and quantitative data collected. I will also connect research and literature to the findings. In addition to making these connections I will draw on future considerations and implications of this work as a potential instructional strategy for vocabulary acquisition.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Word Gap Study is one that has been rewarding and informative. In my role as Director of Literacy I am constantly looking for ways to increase opportunities for students by way of equity and exposure. With that, one of my primary roles is creating and presenting professional learning for teachers in the district. As a lifelong learner this aspect of my job is fulfilling because I have the opportunity to bring teachers along with me on this journey. This journey involves aligning and maximizing new learning to increase teacher capacity and ensure that students achieve at their highest potential. The Word Gap Study incorporated opportunities for both. The LETRS professional learning experience provided research based instructional strategies centered around the science of reading. This aligned with research on The Word Gap and high impact instructional strategies for black males provided opportunities to increase teacher capacity for this study as well as opportunities for increased student achievement.

Summary of Findings

When I initially embarked upon this study my hypothesis as it relates to my problem of practice study questions was simply, providing targeted professional development will increase teacher capacity and vocabulary acquisition of black male students. Specifically, my research questions were:

- Research Question 1: How does targeting professional development aligned to students' vocabulary development increase the quality of a teachers practice in teaching vocabulary?
- Research Question 2: How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the black male students in her classroom?

Although my hypothesis was not confirmed, the study yielded findings that provided insight on possible instructional adjustments that could have a positive impact on vocabulary acquisition. In summary, there were a total of 18 students in the study. At the end of the study there was an increase of 4 students meeting benchmark proficiency from BOY to EOY and an increase of 2 black male students meeting benchmark from BOY to EOY. Additionally, there was a decrease of 1 student meeting the vocabulary benchmark from BOY to EOY and a decrease of 2 black male students meeting the vocabulary benchmark from BOY to EOY. The teacher interview provided additional data regarding perception of impact of professional learning on vocabulary acquisition. The biggest takeaways from the teacher interview were the learning that vocabulary does not have to be explicitly taught, rather there should be intentional opportunities for natural exploration and conversations about new vocabulary embedded in the learning process. Additionally, an intentional focus on vocabulary and a structured process, made students more interested in learning new words.

Interpretations of Findings

At the onset of this study, I reviewed several data and research sources that provided insight into the word gap, its contributing factors, and potential solutions to reduce or eliminate the word gap. These sources included but are not limited to Joe & Davis, 2009; Moore & Lewis, 2014; Greer et al., 2022; and Kozol, 1991. Specifically, I evaluated the current state of the black male, black males in public education, contributing factors of black male achievement and the word gap, teacher behavior and student performance, and effective instructional strategies in reading.

Research conducted by Rathbun et al. (2004) noted that black children were found to have lower overall reading achievement scores than other ethnic groups. This is confirmed in initial data review of the case study classroom where the racial breakdown of the class was 2 black students, 4 asian students, 7 white students, and 5 hispanic students. Given this breakdown, out of the 18 students in the classroom, 10 students were well below benchmark at BOY, 2 students were below benchmark at BOY, 5 students were at benchmark at BOY, and 1 student was above benchmark at BOY. Of the two black male students in the classroom, both black male students were below benchmark at BOY. Two additional studies went further to indicate that the achievement gap in low-income black children is present as early as kindergarten due to limited opportunities for acquiring foundational skills for school success (Calzada et al., 2015). Moore and Lewis, 2014, also found in their study that African American boys are seen as less academically prepared compared to their white peers, especially in early literacy and language. The mCLASS assessment administered to first grade students assesses the same measures as kindergarten students. These measures include letter naming fluency, phonemic segmentation fluency, nonsense word fluency, and word reading fluency. These skills indicate school readiness upon entry into kindergarten and monitor how students are progressing while learning to read. When considering these measures at BOY, the black male students in this study were found to be at benchmark in letter naming fluency but below and well below benchmark in all other measures (phonemic awareness, letter sound fluency, decoding, and word reading).

Irvine (1990) introduced the concept of cultural synchronization, which is the understanding and assimilated value of different cultures as it relates to teacher perceptions of student achievement and social issues, as a critical component of motivating black students to achieve. In his study, Irvine highlights that race/ethnicity, gender, and social class can influence

learning. Further highlighted, an experienced and effective teacher of any racial background is more preferable for black male students than an ineffective teacher of black descent.

Similarly, Fashola (2005), found that a black teacher who educates black males has several important advantages, including modeling appropriate behavior, using shared knowledge strategically, building on common social experiences, providing value-added interest in academic and non-academic subjects, and establishing rapport with black male students. The cooperating teacher in this case study engaged in a series of professional learning sessions which included 5 sessions of LETRS (Learning Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) and The Word Gap Professional Learning which included specific reflective work about bridging the achievement gap for black male students. Through engagement in this professional learning the cooperating teacher was able to reflect on beliefs and biases. Part of the professional learning included an article by Valencia Harris entitled Perspective: Bridging the achievement gap for black male students. When asked to share insight and perspective on her role as a white teacher and how she might engage with black male students the cooperating teacher shared, “school may be the only place some kids get to interact with people who look differently than they do”. Teachers have an important role in creating an environment where students feel safe to be themselves so they can learn and grow. In order to reach marginalized students, Ms. Harris wrote, “Teachers must participate in critical reflection to reflect on their own biases which unmask one’s positionality, perspective, and prejudice.” It can be hard to accept that you have biases, but it is essential teachers see themselves the way the kids see them. Teachers should also take the time to build relationships with their students by getting to know them and having interactions with them that are not all academic in nature, for instance, play with the students at recess. I have made some great connections with kids while throwing a football, playing

basketball, or teaching them 4-square. Harris also wrote about teachers asking students what they need and how they feel, “Where do you feel free, free to be yourself, free to ask questions and give answers?” She asks her students this question several times throughout the year. “I think it’s important to ask students how they are feeling and what they need to ensure their success”.

In their research, Wasik and Hindman (2015) highlighted specific principals and strategies that are impactful for vocabulary acquisition. Two of which were children learn more new words when they’re presented in a meaningful context rather than as isolated facts and children learn words best when they’re exposed to a relatively high density of novel words relative to all words. In my study, students were provided an opportunity to take an interest survey and were provided books to read based on interest. The books they were reading were meaningful and high and density. Students documented new vocabulary from their books within a personal journal.

In their research, Moats and Tolman (2019) highlight three main mechanisms for incidental word learning which should further vocabulary growth beyond the instructional activities that teachers devise: listening to the language of others, being read to, and reading independently. Additionally, they explored two specific concepts of vocabulary development, breadth of vocabulary (recognizing a lot of words given context) and depth of vocabulary (being able to provide a complete, accurate definition for known words and knowing their multiple meanings). In exploring these concepts it was found that deeper knowledge of word meanings was associated with fluent recall of the words and an ability to categorize them. In comparison, breadth of knowledge had a stronger relationship with reading comprehension. With that, it is highly important that teachers incorporate implicit and incidental vocabulary instruction opportunities as they have high impact on vocabulary acquisition. It is also equally important

that there are other natural and organic ways that students acquire vocabulary such as the three main mechanisms for incidental word learning. These concepts were specifically identified within the LETRS professional development. In order to ensure the authentic and relevant reading opportunities students completed an interest survey which led to selection of texts directly related to student interest. This particular portion of the study was successful in that students were able to engage in relevant conversations with peers about topics of interest and newly learned vocabulary. Through independent reading, the students in this study were provided opportunities for that organic and natural approach to vocabulary acquisition.

Limitations of The Study

My experience at Lucky Day Elementary School was eye opening on many levels. When you consider all aspects of this study such as identification of a classroom and teacher, scheduling, professional development, management of instructional tasks, and implementation, there were several challenges which perhaps rendered the inconclusive outcome arrived at in the study. One primary challenge was time. Although I worked with the cooperating teacher to strategically align implementation of the study with the master schedule, there were factors that presented barriers to students actually being able to read and record new vocabulary.

Understandably, core instruction takes priority and oftentimes in the elementary setting, content lessons can and will spill over into the next intended lesson. This can create overlap and unfortunately lead to things being eliminated in the school day. As a result, there were instances where students did not experience targeted vocabulary acquisition process as intended for the day. Additionally, my post interview with the teacher revealed that a beginning of the school year start would have, in her opinion, yielded greater vocabulary acquisition. This feedback was in line with the time constraint mentioned earlier. Once routines are set for the year it is

extremely difficult to insert or pivot mid-year in a different direction unless you are replacing a previous practice. Additionally, a beginning of the year start would have potentially yielded “double” the results as this would have been double the amount of implementation time and in essence this might have moved the needle that much more with regards to end of year achievement results. An additional limitation noted in the post interview was the use of the dictionaries to define the new terms. This was an unforeseen limitation. The use of the dictionary is a learned and practiced skill, two considerations which were not taken into account prior to the study. An introduction to or refresher for the use of the dictionary would have been beneficial to students and perhaps might have saved some of the time lost when students were navigating the dictionary. As an alternative, students were given the option to use Google when defining new words.

Implications for Practice

At the onset of this study there were several things that led to the creation of the problem of practice and guiding questions. The Word Gap is an occurrence that is ongoing and has implications far beyond vocabulary acquisition. At any age, our vocabulary impacts communication, performance, and perception to name a few. As a student, vocabulary is one of the acquired skills that directly impact comprehension. Comprehension is the key measurement on state and national assessments. Our performance on assessments has an immediate, direct, and short term impact on grading and student achievement. From a long-term perspective, performance and achievement impacts opportunities for college. Along the same lines, our vocabulary impacts our writing. As there are comprehension assessments throughout our educational careers and beyond, there exists writing assessments in the form of essays, written response questions, college admission papers, and in some instances, work related

responsibilities. How we communicate also impacts perceptions of intelligence, intellect, and ability. These perceptions have implications on teachers' expectations as well as job opportunities. A student, employee, or potential employee with what is viewed as having a limited vocabulary is likely to be overlooked for any opportunity that is subjective. Implications for school leadership involve an intentional approach to supporting and implementing vocabulary instruction. This should involve a process that is not the teaching of vocabulary in isolation, rather relevant to the reading content. With this in mind, a school leader might review and evaluate the vocabulary acquisition processes within the curriculum to ensure alignment to best practices and research.

Recommendations

When we consider the overall inconclusive outcomes of the study, there are a few recommendations that should be considered for future implementation. As mentioned earlier within the limitations, both time and planning are factors that might have improved the overall impact of the project. For future planning I would recommend incorporating a refresher or introduction to dictionary use. This would help reduce any lost time that would occur when students are attempting to navigate the dictionary. An alternative to dictionary use might be the use of Google or an online dictionary. Additionally, a longer runway of planning such as beginning at the start of the school year would provide students with adequate time to acquire substantial vocabulary, perhaps double what was acquired in this study and it would also allow for practices and routines to be in place at the onset of the school year.

Personal Leadership Growth

The Word Gap study was both affirming and enlightening. It gave me the opportunity to dig into the research, extend my learning about best practices for teaching reading, and consider

my role in impacting this statistic. The research was enlightening in that I was unaware of the fact that there is a 30 million word gap that exists between low economic children and their more affluent peers. This is troubling for me because in my experience analyzing data as an educator, there is an apparent achievement gap between low SES students and their peers. This draws a potential correlation between vocabulary acquisition early on, and later overall achievement. I was affirmed and enlightened by the research surrounding best practices for teaching reading. Understanding that best practices that yield results in teaching reading involve interest and selection by the student. Additionally, vocabulary should be taught in the most natural and organic format as opposed to in isolation. With that, my role in impacting this statistic relies heavily on my ability to be a reflective practitioner. That is, I will need to constantly evaluate practices within my sphere of influence as a curriculum lead in the district and make necessary adjustments according to the research, best practices, and the individual needs of students.

Conclusion

As an African American male with more than 25 years of varied educational experience, it is my desire to constantly evaluate ways to provide equitable opportunities for learning. My experiences in grade school, higher education, and within my career have driven this passion because of the understanding that biases exist regarding beliefs and expectations for black males. How we communicate has lasting impressions with those that we interact with. An extensive vocabulary can be viewed as intelligence and can open doors of a wide range of opportunities. Something as simple as the job interview process is an example of how vocabulary can limit or extend opportunities. In most cases in a job interview, the “winner” is the person who is better able to present a compelling case of why they should be selected based on verbal responses to questions. Your more extensive interviews include a performance task and even a presentation.

However, the verbal responses have a huge impact and unfortunately there are instances where the most qualified candidate is overlooked because their counterpart is able to outspoke them because of a more extensive vocabulary. Even more unsettling, your vocabulary has absolutely little bearing on your ability to do the job.

Standardized tests such as end of grade reading tests as well as SAT and ACT exams also have heavy emphasis and implications on vocabulary. Vocabulary measures are often used to estimate students' verbal intelligence in research because the correlations between vocabulary and other types of verbal reasoning tests are very high. If a student has had limited life experiences and limited vocabulary, there may be terms on these exams that are unfamiliar limiting their access and ultimately their ability to be successful on the test. Moreover, in order to fully comprehend and make meaning of a text you have to know and understand 90% of the words within the text. Along the same lines, there are often interviews required to enter college and graduate school. A limited vocabulary in these instances can limit opportunity and access.

On a more foundational level, vocabulary is the single most important factor in reading comprehension. The ability to make sense of the context evolves around the ability to make sense of the words. Vocabulary accounts for approximately 50-60% of the variance in reading. Children with higher vocabulary are more successful with phonemic awareness making the task of learning to read easier.

As I close, I would like to give you an example of the power of word knowledge. Consider watching the dance show "Dancing with the Stars" and one of the judges does not know a waltz from a samba. In this instance this judge might resort to reacting to a couples performance inaccurately due to his/her lack of understanding of the dance styles. However, if the remaining judges have a deep understanding of the terms posture, timing, togetherness, line,

hold, poise, musically, presentation, power, shape, and foot action, their vantage point will be completely different. Having a vocabulary for dance will help in this instance both in thinking about the actual dance and in deepening his/her appreciation for the art form.

It is my desire to continue the work of expanding vocabulary opportunities for black males and ultimately all students. We have a vocabulary gap that some may consider to be a crisis. The implications of this gap ranges from early reading development to future job opportunities. I appreciate this work and this study because it has provided me with a renewed focus and mission in my educational career. One that will have a lasting impression on many students for many years to come.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

2/25/24, 3:45 PM

Mail - Johnson, Shawn David - Outlook

RX: Your study has been approved

umcirb@ecu.edu <umcirb@ecu.edu>

Wed 5/3/2023 12:20 PM

To: Johnson, Shawn David <johnsonsha21@students.ecu.edu>



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
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600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Shawn Johnson](#)
CC: [Karen Jones](#)
Date: 5/3/2023
Re: [UMCIRB 23-000642](#)
The Word Gap

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 5/3/2023. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;
2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;
4. Submission of a final report application to the UMCIRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and

5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Oral Student Assent	Consent Forms
Parental Permission to Allow Your Child to Take Part in Research (revised) (1).docx	Consent Forms
Teacher research consent letter (revised).doc	Consent Forms
The Vocabulary Intervention Project Checklist and Interview Questions.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
The Vocabulary Intervention Project Checklist and Interview Questions.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
The Word Gap and Its Implications on K-5 Black Male Achievement and Beyond	Study Protocol or Grant Application
ThingsThatInterestMe-1 (1).pdf	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

Study.PI Name:
Study.Co-Investigators:

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Parental Permission to Allow Your Child to Take Part in Research

Information to consider before allowing your child to take part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: The Word Gap and Its Implications on K-5 Black Male Achievement and Beyond

Principal Investigator: Shawn Johnson (Person in Charge of this Study)

Address: 209 King Oak Street Holly Springs NC

Telephone #: 910-920-6347

Participant Full Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
Please PRINT clearly

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why is my child being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to identify instructional strategies and professional development to increase vocabulary attainment in all students to lessen the achievement gap and increase proficiency for all. Your child's teacher will receive professional development and resources to provide opportunities for your child and the students in his/her class to increase their vocabulary. Your child is being invited to take part in this research because their teacher was selected for this study. The decision for your child to take part in this research will also depend upon whether your child wants to participate. By doing this research, we hope to learn how to better equip our teachers with the professional development and resources to increase vocabulary in our students and ultimately answer the question(s) How does targeting professional development aligned to students' vocabulary development increase the quality of a teacher's practice in teaching vocabulary? and How does targeting professional development for an identified first grade teacher provide her with the knowledge of instructional approaches and specific strategies to increase vocabulary in the black male students in her classroom?

If you and your child agree for him/her to volunteer for this research, your child will be one of about 20 people to do so.

Are there reasons my child should not take part in this research?

I understand I should not agree for my child to take part in this study if he/she is unable or uncomfortable. All study components will be embedded within and aligned to the regular school day activities.

What other choices do I have if my child does not take part in this research?

Your child can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Dillard Drive Elementary School within your child's classroom during the fourth quarter, April 10th – June 9th

What will my child be asked to do?

Your child will be asked to do the following:

- Engage in their regularly scheduled mCLASS diagnostic assessment.
- Read books on a topic of choice and record new vocabulary in a reading log.
- Engage in conversations with peers and their teacher about newly learned vocabulary.
- Complete a survey that indicates topics of interest for reading.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if your child will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to your child but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will my child be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you or your child for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me anything for my child to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and the principal investigator will know that your child took part in this research and may see information about your child that is normally kept private (such as test data). With your permission, these people may use your child's private information to do this research but will not make this information public.

How will you keep the information you collect about my child secure? How long will you keep it?

The confidential data collected on your student will be maintained within the mCLASS portal. This portal is private and requires a log in for access.

What if my child decides he/she doesn't want to continue in this research?

Your child can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if he/she stops and he/she will not be criticized. Your child will not lose any benefits that he/she would normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 910-920-6347. If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutions Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may contact the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I should know?

Your child's information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies./

I have decided my child can take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
 - I know that my child can stop taking part in this study at any time.
 - By signing this informed consent form, my child is not giving up any of his/her rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Parent's Name (PRINT)**Signature****Date**

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)**Signature****Date**

APPENDIX C: FIDELITY CHECKLIST

The Vocabulary Intervention Project

Implementation Fidelity Checklist

	Yes	No	Not Observed
1. Students indicate that they have voice in the selection of their text topics.			
2. The texts that students are engaging in are on the same topic.			
3. Students have an opportunity for formal and informal vocabulary assessments during and after engaging in the texts.			
4. Students have independent reading opportunities.			
5. Students have the opportunity to communicate about the texts that they are reading with their peers in their group.			
6. Based on the curriculum and literacy block structure of CCPS, the activities that students are engaging in are different and separate from the norm.			
Additional Comments:			

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The Vocabulary Intervention Project

Implementation Interview Question

1. Prior to this project, what was your approach to teaching vocabulary?
2. Complete this statement, “I used to think but now I know -----, about vocabulary instruction”.
3. How has your instruction changed as a result of this project?
4. What differences have you observed in your students use of vocabulary as a result of this project?
5. What would you like to share about your experience engaging in this project?
6. How has the professional learning that you received impacted your instructional approaches to teaching vocabulary?

APPENDIX E: STUDENT INTEREST SURVEY

Things that Interest Me!

Name:

Date:

Circle your answers:

I like it when people read to me	Yes	No
I like to read books with someone	Yes	No
I like to read books by myself	Yes	No
I like to read stories that are	Funny	Happy Sad
I like to read stories that are	Real	Make-believe

Here is the name of a good book

My favorite t.v. show is _____

My favorite game is _____

My favorite toy is _____

My favorite place to go is _____

When I am home I like to _____

When I am with my friends, I like to _____

These are some things I am good at _____

I would like to meet this person _____

If I had a million dollars I would _____

When I grow up I would like to _____

APPENDIX F: TEACHER SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

The Vocabulary Intervention Project

Implementation Interview Questions

1. Prior to this project, what was your approach to teaching vocabulary?

Before this project and Language Comprehension, I would pre-teach vocabulary words for texts and teach in response to questions from students or when I realized there was a lack of understanding. We also have vocabulary lists, and we would teach words as parts of Science or Social Studies units first in isolation, then in context.

2. Complete this statement, “I used to think but now I know -----, about vocabulary instruction”.

I used to think vocabulary should be pre-taught, but now I know vocabulary can be explored and discovered in texts.

3. How has your instruction changed as a result of this project?

I do not pre-teach vocabulary during language comprehension texts. I also ask for students to give me definitions of what they think the word means based on context clues, especially in Math, Science, and Social Studies.

4. What differences have you observed in your student's use of vocabulary as a result of this project?

My students were more focused on wanting to know the meaning of words they did not understand, instead of just reading over it and ignoring the fact that they did not completely comprehend the text.

5. What would you like to share about your experience engaging in this project?

It was a valuable experience overall. My kids were excited about the opportunity to look up words in the dictionary, define them, and draw pictures to help them remember their new words. However, my class was comprised of many students below grade level, and most were unable to complete these activities independently. I think the project would have been more successful if it had started earlier in the school year and as an enrichment activity for students at or above grade level.

6. How has the professional learning that you received impacted your instructional approaches to teaching vocabulary?

I am much more intentional about teaching vocabulary and looking for opportunities to have kids be more interactive with it. I have also learned to preview the text and find level 2 words to work on with students. My students love acting out the vocabulary words, which is something I picked up year ago from an Art's Integration training but have not always kept up with. In first grade any kinesthetic activity helps them remember their learning.

